

The Palestinian Romeo

By Uri Avnery

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Arna Mer was a tempestuous and exciting woman. She was the daughter of a professor of medicine, who had already become a legend in his own lifetime. As a young woman she joined the legendary Palmakh fighters of the underground army, and since then the Keffiyah affected by them became her trade-mark. After the 1948 war she joined the Communist party, then the most hated group in Israel, and married an Arab party functionary. Her two well-known sons, Juliano and Spartak, bear revolutionary names.

At the beginning of the occupation, Arna adopted the Jenin refugee camp, a sea of misery and deprivation, and created an island of light: a children's theater. With the help of Juliano, then an aspiring young actor, she assembled a group of 9-10 year old boys and girls, and improvised performances with the most primitive means. Speaking fluent Arabic, she identified completely with the Palestinian suffering and encouraged the children to express their anger, pride and opposition to the occupation. For this dedication she was awarded the "Alternative Nobel Prize" in Stockholm. On the eve of her death from cancer, worn out and fragile, she visited the camp to say good-bye.

Such a personality could fill a full-length film all by herself. But in the film "Arna's Children", directed by Juliano, the "children" star side by side with the "mother" and turn the film into a unique document – indispensable for anyone who wants to understand the intifada.

A year ago, Muhammad Bakri's film "Jenin, Jenin" aroused a storm in Israel and even reached the Supreme Court (who overturned the decision that forbade its being shown). Both films partly cover the same ground: the Jenin events of April 2002, when the Israeli army invaded the West Bank town and refugee camp as part of "Operation Defensive Shield". Both show profound empathy for the Palestinian side. But there is a big difference between the two. In Muhammad Bakri's film, the people of Jenin are shown as victims of a massacre. In Juliano Mer's version, they appear as heroes who take on the overwhelming might of the Israeli army. The Palestinian fighters in the film angrily deny the claim that

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there was a “massacre”, a claim they consider humiliating and insulting. Their attitude reminds one somewhat of the survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt.

What makes this film into an unforgettable experience is the double exposure of its heroes. Juliano filmed them when they were children, members of Arna’s group. They are captivating boys and girls, full of spirit and humor. We see them on all fours, barking and attacking each other playing at being “dogs”. We see Ashraf, the most impressive boy, dreaming of a future when he will be the “Palestinian Romeo”. We observe these children, living in inhuman conditions, dreaming of a life of happiness and splendor.

As the film unfolds, we meet them again, by now young men. The smiling, captivating Ashraf, the Palestinian Romeo, blew himself up on a suicide mission. As is usual in such cases, just before the action he recorded a last statement on video: a bearded youngster, solemn, determined, explaining that death is better than life in the hell of a refugee camp under occupation. Others fell – “fell” and were not “massacred” – in the Battle of Jenin.

The Palestinians treat Juliano with perfect trust, in spite of his being a “Yahudi” (Actually he is only half Jewish, but in their eyes he is a Jew). As a result, he was given an opportunity that no other Israeli ever had: he was allowed to accompany and photograph them by day and by night, until the end. Thus a really unique and invaluable document was created. It shows how those men who are described in IDF press-releases as “armed men” and declared to be “sons of death” (meaning: liable to be killed) live and die.

We see them moving in small groups, equipped with light arms, or sleeping in their clothes, ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice. They sit together, chain-smoking, sometimes joking with each other, as fighters do before battle. A spirit of brotherhood and camaraderie is in the air. They are, all in all, young people full of life, who know that their days are numbered. None of them is a religious fanatic.

When the observation posts alert them by cellular phone that an Israeli armored unit is approaching, they go out to attack it, Kalashnikovs and pistols against the heavy tanks. But, as they say, they are determined not to surrender, to fight to the end (rather in the spirit of Samson in the Bible: “Let me die with the Philistines” [Judges, 16, 30].)

This is the other side of the routine army spokesman’s announcements: “In the course of a search for wanted terrorists, the IDF entered the refugee camp...In the ensuing firefight, five armed Palestinians were killed...Our forces sustained no losses...”

It is no secret that lately the army has been sending armored columns into Palestinian towns not to “arrest wanted terrorists” or to “eliminate ticking bombs”, but to draw these armed fighters out of their hiding-places and induce them to attack the tanks – an action tantamount to suicide.

In the end, the photos of almost all of Arna’s children – side by side, again – appeared on

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the walls in posters commemorating the Martyrs. The children, who are so gay and full of pranks at the beginning of the film, had become solemn and threatening.

In the eyes of most Israelis, they are simply terrorists, murderers and criminals, whose sole aim in life is to “spill Jewish blood”. They do not see the human beings and do not ask where they came from and what got them to do what they are doing. Therefore, they do not understand the source of their strength and tenacity.

In the eyes of the Palestinians, these are their national heroes, valiant and dedicated young people who sacrifice their lives for the dignity and future of their people. They think of them much as we thought of our underground fighters before Israel was created.

Ashraf, the Palestinian Romeo-to-be, died together with his friends, like Romeo in Shakespeare’s tragedy. But seeing this film, one knows that for every one who falls there are dozens to take his place.

Leaving the hall after the screening, a question was forming in my mind: in the end, when the Palestinians attain their independence and these fighters will become part of the national mythology, will the relations formed in the darkest times between these children and Arna and the likes of her provide a basis for reconciliation?

It is always difficult to see the other side of a coin, even more so in the middle of fighting, when pain, anger and hatred rule supreme. This film presents us with a rare opportunity to get a fuller and more realistic picture. It is a very moving film, a film that opens our eyes and explains why the Israeli army cannot vanquish the intifada – although “winning every day”, as the Gaza Strip commander announced this week with blind pride.

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