

The Battle of the Coffeepot -- Jenin: July 2002

By Starhawk

On the day the UN releases its report on the Israeli West Bank offensive of last April, I am lying in a stifling apartment in Jenin city shared by eleven of us from the International Solidarity Movement, a group which supports nonviolent means of struggle for justice in Palestine. We are awakened at 4:00 a.m. by gunshots. We yawn and go back to sleep. Gunshots are normal in Jenin.

Shortly after, we hear the grinding roar of tanks in the empty predawn streets, rumbling under our windows. We go back to sleep. Tanks are normal in Jenin, and it is still dark, too early to go chase them and stand in front of them to deter the soldiers hidden inside from firing into the marketplace, which is their usual method of announcing a curfew. No one is yet out in the market, anyway.

At 6:15 a.m., a loud explosion shakes us out of bed again. Tobias and Nicholas, the two young Swedish men who have been in Jenin all summer, sleep on, but the rest of us get up. The explosion is a bit louder and closer than normal.

A building around the corner from us has been blown up, leaving eight families homeless, destroying six shops and damaging others. We go over to film and interview, to witness. The apartments are reduced to a strip of floor clinging to the one remaining wall, revealing the pattern of rooms like a grotesque doll's house. I look into a kitchen where the dishes are still drying. In the bathroom next to it, the sink is still intact. I imagine I can see toothbrushes still awaiting use. A green, potted tree clings to the fragments of a balcony. A door opens in the third floor of the ruined apartment building: a man peers out at what once was his living room, now blasted into empty space. Below, two boys fish for their clothing through a crack. An old man picks his way up a ruined staircase to salvage some of the goods from his shop. On the street, onlookers commiserate. A man sets up a brass coffee pot on a small stand and serves Arabic coffee.

The eight families who lived in the crowded apartment building were refugees from Jenin camp, where their homes had been among the 450 destroyed in the April offensive.

For four days and nights, the Israeli Defense Forces shelled the camp, rounded up and arrested the men, expelled people from their houses in the center of camp and bulldozed their homes into oblivion.

Three months later, we walk through the "Zone of Total Destruction," an area the size of a football field piled with rubble two and three stories high. This is destruction on a geologic scale, tectonic, mountain building destruction. Somewhere underneath lie the belongings of the eight families who lost their homes today.

Evidence of ordinary life can still be seen among the chunks of concrete and twisted beams. A scrap of flowered cloth, the handlebars of a bicycle, a couch suspended midair. A doll's hand lying severed on the path makes us shudder.

The destruction was carried out in such haste that not everyone was evacuated from the buildings. Children were crushed to death; old people trapped. When the army let families back in, they searched the ruins frantically. A few survivors, trapped beneath the ruins, remained in cell phone contact with their families until the batteries died. The army refused to let in search and rescue teams. Desperate fathers and anguished mothers dug through the concrete with bare hands. The army refused to allow in ambulances. Some of the wounded bled to death. Tanks drove back and forth over the ruins, homogenizing bones and flesh and concrete into one porridge of death so that when search teams were finally allowed in, the stench was so ubiquitous that even the dogs could not distinguish the location of individual bodies. Still, searchers found remains: a severed finger, a baby's arm, a young girl's braid.

The UN never sent its fact finding team to Jenin. The Israelis simply refused to cooperate, and the Khofi Annan never effectively challenged them. So the UN report, which carefully avoids the word "massacre," was compiled from postings on the Internet and other peoples' reports. They never examined these ruins nor interviewed the survivors. They never spoke to the gracious man whose wife served us tea as he described how he collected the scattered limbs of his brother to bury. They never heard a father tell of the prayer he uttered over the blackened corpse of his daughter.

Now total destruction has become normal: paths wind their way through the rubble. Small boys play King of the Mountain atop piles of it. We walk through it in the blazing, 120-degree heat. Shops are closed. Curfew is on and off, with no discernible pattern. People cannot work regular hours. We want to spend a morning with the children, to make instruments and banners and stage a march. But curfew is on and the children cannot leave their houses.

The tanks roll into Jenin City: boys and young men run out to throw stones. Their mothers sit in the alleyways, visiting, trying to keep the younger children from joining the pack of boys. A man sets out a coffeepot. We drink Arabic coffee while listening to gunfire. A tall man with a long stick tries to herd the small children away to safety. The tanks fire, the boys run back. Down the street, we hear some answering fire from the Palestinian guns. The tanks roll closer: the coffeepot is taken in, the women grab chairs and scurry for shelter. The tanks roll on: the young men follow after with stones. Sometimes they get shot: but death is normal in Jenin. You can die walking down the street from a sniper. You can die from a ricochet when the tanks fire over the crowds at the market. You can die because of what your brother, uncle, cousin did or what the army thinks he did. You can die from some nineteen-year-old soldier's momentary mistake.

The coffeepot comes out again: the women bring out their chairs. The girls play a clapping game in the alley. There is nothing else to do in Jenin under curfew, nowhere else for the children to play, no soccer games, no playground, no swimming pool. There is only one game, one issue, one thing to do, one movie playing. Occupation. All the shops are closed: the market has been empty all day. The tanks roll on and the young men follow like crows in the wake of a garbage truck. "Go home you bastards!" the

Israeli soldiers shout in three languages. "What can we do?" one of the older boys asks. "We can't just let them pass without doing something, even if it's only throwing stones." He is an art student, he tells us. He would like to travel, to see the great museums of Europe. He goes to the University, which is closed because of the curfew. He apologizes to us for the younger boys. "I hope they are not bothering you," he says. "They don't get to see too many strangers."

The UN report confirms says the use of heavy shelling and helicopter gunships in the densely populated camp was "disproportionate." It confirms 52 deaths.

What it doesn't confirm is the death of hope, when the guns and the tanks and the daily humiliations become normal. And what the UN investigators never saw, because they never came to Jenin, is the true strength here, that ability to reconstitute a bit of normal life on the edge of ruin, to make a path through the rubble and carry on. For the battle here, in the end, is not about who has the bigger guns. It's a battle of tanks and shells and bulldozers and F16s against the coffeepot, the women visiting, the children playing their games, a fig tree taking root in the ruins.

"Go home, you bastards!" the soldiers shout over their bullhorn.

But the people of Jenin are home.

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