**Jenin, Your Freedom is My Freedom**

Kate Raphael

**April 2003**

I’ve been in Jenin for three days. It’s a small city in the northern West Bank. One year ago, it was the scene of a massacre of epic proportion. The Israeli army invaded with tanks, at the same time flying over with Apache helicopters. Assaulted from air and land, people huddled in closets and under tables, fearing the banging on the door, the sound of wood and glass smashing. Over the eleven days, when no journalists or aid workers were allowed to enter the city, at least fifty-two Palestinians were killed, most of them unarmed. Their bodies were left to molder in the street; the ambulances and rescue crews prevented by the tanks from reaching them. Three thousand people were left homeless.

Jenin is intense. We often hear shots being fired, and every checkpoint is manned (yes, that is the appropriate word) with tanks. Yet the last days have been quiet, except for Monday night when the army called curfew and the tanks were everywhere, firing shots in all directions.

There has been no curfew since Tuesday morning. We wander around, shopping, meeting people, seeing what can be done. Of course, everywhere we go, people stop us to ask about Brian Avery, the young American shot in the face the other day. How is he? Will he be coming back? They say, "He is one of us." The city council voted to give him Jenin citizenship, so he can return any time he likes to this city where he shed his blood and almost lost his life. When it is quiet, everyone waits for the time when it is no longer quiet. Everyone knows that any minute, the tanks may appear again, the shooting may start, the bulldozers and other instruments of punishment may arrive. It is a place where no one can relax.

Just an hour ago, as I sat peacefully in this internet café, uploading files to the internet, having assured my friend Ayesha that it was safe for her to walk back to our apartment alone at night, I heard the tanks roll in, followed by a burst of gunfire. We all instinctively went to the windows, though I thought, *Don't they say to stay away from the windows when there's shooting?* A few seconds after I moved away, we heard what sounded like breaking glass very near us.

Jenin has known so much devastation and despair, it is jaded. The ordinary apparatus of hatred and control do not impress the people of this city, and their nonchalance rubs off even on me, who has been quite sheltered in my life.

This afternoon I went to the Camp, to shoot pictures of an art exhibition commemorating the tragedy of a year ago. I have been haunted by Jenin Camp since a year ago, when I joined a small band of motley human rights activists trying—and failing—to enter the camp during the siege. A few weeks later, as I sat safe at home in California, friends of mine were the first foreigners able to enter the camp. Through them, I heard the first stories of the survivors and saw the smuggled images of bodies crushed and burned beyond recognition, the homes upon homes reduced to rubble. I had nightmares about this place. Yet now, it is peaceful. The only reminder of the human-wrought catastrophe which the people of this Camp suffered is a huge pit near the entrance of the camp, where over 200 families used to live. My friend, Starhawk, said that when she was here in July, it was a three-story rubble pile. Now, children run through the open space, playing with tires. On every half-destroyed building, a Star of David is painted. Some also sport graffiti in English, "Live free or die," "We will stay here," "Sharon,\* you only make us stronger."

Of course, as soon as I took out my camera, the children were on me, demanding to have their pictures taken, or to play with the camera. I let them for a few minutes, enjoying their curiosity and lively attention. When I was leaving the cultural center, where the exhibit hangs, a little girl, eleven years old but looking much younger, dragged me back by the hand. She led me to one corner, where a Palestinian flag half hid a tissue paper drawing. The drawing was very good, featuring tanks, missiles, and some very scared residents of the camp. Like all good artists, Mai did not say anything about her work. She just nodded soberly when I pointed to her and to the drawing.

I did not have to pretend to be impressed. She had really captured, with sparse lines, the terror of the people, and with her use of the space, the scale of the assault. She said, "Saori,” take a picture, pointing to the drawing, and I took one of her standing next to her masterpiece.

As I walked through the camp later, children picked wildflowers for me. Their parents and grandparents called, "*Tfadali*," which means loosely, "come in, have tea." I met a woman who worked for the Red Crescent and spoke excellent English. She studied at the University in Beirut, graduating in 1975. She asked me to come to her home in the mountains.

“It’s late,” I said. “Another day.”

A man stopped me as I passed his store and asked eagerly, “Sprichen sie Deutsch?” “Ja, ein bischen,” I responded. (I can say, literally, “a little,” in many languages.) He told me he worked for many years in Zurich, as a buyer of fabrics. As so often in this country, I felt incredibly happy and incredibly sorrowful, grateful for the nurturing kindness of people who have so little but give it so freely, and angry at what my people have wrought in the name of our security.

Jenin, your freedom is my freedom.

**December 2023**

We do not hear about Jenin these days. Everything is Gaza, the horrific magnitude of one tragedy wiping a lesser one from our mental map.

But I remember Jenin.

*\* Gen. Ariel Sharon, then Prime Minister of Israel*