

# **ALL THE COLOURS OF THE RAINBOW**

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JENIN REFUGEE CAMP**

I was born over sixty years ago in a small community in Palestine, in the Jewish Moshava Rosh Pina and the Arab village Ja'ouni.

These rocky but green hills of the Upper Galilee, were at the time under the British Mandate.

Since 1948, Jewish Rosh Pina has grown and developed whereas the village of Ja'ouni has been erased from the face of the earth. Its inhabitants became what we term the Palestinian Refugees, dispersed from their homeland and confined in camps.

Even the land, the source of livelihood and the foundation of an entire culture passed into the hands of others, through sheer robbery or forced displacement.

This has left a deep wound in my soul. While one half of me is intact, the other bears the terrible pain of that reality.

In this land were sown the seeds of racism and suffering, wars and death and pain. An entire nation stands before us bereft of human rights, where children grow up surrounded by the imagery of soldiers, stones and guns. They are scared, they are threatened, they are vulnerable. And their cries of suffering are drowned by loudspeakers screaming about Law, Order, Security and Progress.

I came towards these children with the burden of my past, my broken half. I tried to tear away the veil of hypocrisy and crime, piled up like rubbish on the streets of Jenin and its refugee camp.

The camp was erected 45 years ago, and its children and grandchildren were born to face Israeli occupation to this very day.

It is imperative that we reveal the hypocrisy which leaves these children wounded on the battlefield without first aid. Their wounds are deep even though they are not bleeding. Their souls and spirits are wounded, their development handicapped. They are children beaten and shot who have witnessed their parents and siblings being humiliated by soldiers.

They are children who have experienced long interrogations in prison, children who have been prevented from studying, when their schools and kindergartens were closed down. These are children who know the Israeli, only as a soldier shooting to kill, who beats and humiliates them.

Ladies and gentlemen, on this day, the 9th of December 1993, exactly six years ago, all these children joined hands in a battle for freedom with a rock and a burning tyre. They shouted their passion for liberty, for an end to oppression and humiliation and for the hope of a better life, the hope of the intifada.

This is where our paths met!

We formed an organisation: In the Defence of Children under Occupation/Care and Learning. And we have been engaged in this task daily, hour by hour, on days of closure and curfew, on working days and holidays, trying to bring these children a morsel of happiness and hope by means of books, games and educational brochures. But first and foremost we have been with these children on the street, near the jail house and inside the military courtrooms in order to sow and tend the seeds of hope for a better life.

Since 1988 a new landscape has started to find its way into the familiar one. In the alleys of the refugee camp, in the streets of Jenin and in the surrounding villages, large rolls of paper were unrolled, paints and brushes distributed and hundreds of children together could be seen laughing and shouting, painting together their thoughts and dreams, their anger and hope in all the colours of the rainbow.

They were six years old, eight and twelve, children for whom these hours were the only time they could feel hopeful in the midst of violent occupation and repression.

Our task was never easy. It was not paved with roses but mined with bullets and soldiers, anxious mothers and frightened children whose wounds have yet to heal.

We shall not halt our struggle on behalf of these children and all others, until peace and freedom can flow from their dreams and become reality.

***This text is formed of extracts from Arna Mer Khamis's speech at the Right Livelihood Awards. With the prize money, she went on to co-found The Stone Theatre with other women from Jenin Refugee Camp and her son, actor and director Juliano Mer Khamis. The Stone Theatre was destroyed in the 2nd Intifada and many of her students were killed. Juliano returned to Jenin Refugee Camp to build The Freedom Theatre in 2006. He was later murdered outside the theatre in 2011.***