

MY TERRORIST



Daily Mail Wednesday, August 23, 1978



Fahad Mihi and I, Yulie Gerstel, first met in London in Aug. '78, when Mihi pointed a machine gun at me in a terrorist attack of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine against an El Al Israel airline crew. 22 years later, I visited Mihi in prison in England, and decided to help in obtaining his release. This film will be my testimonial evidence to Mihi's parole hearing.

A film by Yulie Cohen Gerstel



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MY TERRORIST

film synopsis

Fahad Mihy, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Yulie Cohen, a sixth-generation Israeli, first encountered one another in August 1978, when Mihy pointed a machine gun at the El Al flight attendant in a terrorist attack. Twenty-three years later, in an effort to help break the cycle of violence, Yulie considers writing a letter in support of Mihy's parole, thus thrusting herself into the turbulent world of Middle East politics. Growing up in an upper middle-class neighborhood in Israel, she served in the military and was a proud citizen of her country. After working as a photojournalist and visiting the occupied territories along the Gaza Strip, Gerstel came to realize that both Israelis and Palestinians played a role in perpetuating the cycle of hostility and bloodshed. It became her goal to stand up as a survivor and call for reconciliation on each side. Winner of a Special Jury Prize at the Jerusalem International Film Festival, and nominated for the Silver Wolf award at the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival, *My Terrorist* asks hard questions about the meaning of forgiveness and hate, the inevitability of violence and, just possibly, about the chance of reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis.

film credits



Director/Producer:
Yulie Cohen Gerstel

Editor:
Boaz Lion

Cinematographer:
Oded Kirma, Moshe Gerstel, Yulie Cohen
Gerstel

Sound:
Itai Alohav

Music:
Tal Segev



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MY TERRORIST

festivals and prizes

Jerusalem Film Festival – Special Jury Prize
Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival – Silver Wolf Nomination
Human Rights Watch Film Festival
San Francisco International Film Festival
One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival
Encounters South African International Documentary Festival
DC International Film Festival
LA Amnesty International Film Festival
Seattle, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver Jewish Film Festivals
Seoul Human Rights Watch Film Festival
Jeonju International Film Festival
Denmark National Film Festival

Israel, 2002, color, video, 58 minutes



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MY TERRORIST

biography



Yulie Cohen Gerstel was born and lives in Tel Aviv. Before starting to work in films, she studied sociology and anthropology at Tel Aviv University (BA) and received an MA with distinction in Communication Art from NYIT. During the 80's, Gerstel was working in films in New York and LA. In 1993 she became an independent filmmaker, directing *Hemdat Yanim* (1995) and *Golden Cage* (1999). During 2000 - 2001 she co-produced with Michal Aviad, *Ramleh* (doc. 60 min) and *For My Children* (doc. 60 min). *My Terrorist* is Gerstel's first long (60 min) documentary as a director/producer. Gerstel is the Head of the Forum of Israeli Documentary Filmmakers.

what people are saying

"Yulie Cohen Gerstel's film is a mixture of things: an autobiographical video-diary, a reach back into her own past and a compelling, tragic vision of what it means to be an Israeli these days."

– Nick Fraser, *BBC Storyville*

"Absorbing...raises all kind of thorny questions about terrorism and forgiveness."

– *Seattle Weekly*

"...bracingly honest...her incredible courage is an example to us all..."

– Noah Cowan, *indieWire*

"A personal journey of discovery, a provocative consideration of the consequences of terrorism"

– Montreal Jewish Film Festival

"A moving and personal account of one woman's struggle to step outside the cycle of retribution, to understand, to forgive, and to make peace."

– One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival

"...a riveting, thought-provoking, heart wrenching experience."

– Derich Mantonela, *SGN.org*

"It's an act of reconciliation, which is also politically very unpopular in Israel at this violent and volatile time. We applaud her courage for inviting us on her journey as she wrestled with and eventually overcame her own doubts."

– Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival, Silver Wolf Competition Jury

MY TERRORIST

director's statement

When I first saw Fahad Mihi in August 1978 he looked suspicious to me. I was part of an Israeli El Al airline crew arriving at a central London. After a few minutes, Fahad Mihi pointed a machine gun towards us and started to shoot. Fahad Mihi and his partner killed one stewardess and wounded 3 of us. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine took responsibility for the attack. A year later I was a witness in Mihi's trial in London. He received 4 concurrent life sentences.

22 years later, I started to wonder about "my" terrorist. I wanted to come to grips with the man who had tried to kill me and to understand his motives. I wanted reconciliation. The year was 2000 and I was convinced that, like many other Palestinian political prisoners in Israel, he may have been released as part of the Oslo accords. Unexpectedly I found Fahad Mihi in English prison, lonely and deserted. Both his family and the PFLP had disowned him. After corresponding with Fahad I visited him in prison. He expressed deep remorse, said that he had turned away from political violence and was now pro-peace. I decided I wanted to help get him released.

When I had first started to look for Fahad the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians seemed to be very real. But when the 2nd Intifada broke out in October 2000 the peace process was shattered. Palestinian suicide bombings and the killings of Palestinians by Israelis became a frightening and painful part of our everyday reality again. Fear and hatred started spreading all over, taking control of the old-new Israeli consensus. David and Goliath: small Israel needs to fight for its life against the rest of the big cruel Arab world. The mainstream stopped supporting these acts of reconciliation and I was accused of being a traitor. My belief in reconciliation, which was a real opportunity in September 2000, became in a mere four weeks a subversive act.

My Terrorist begins with my childhood in Tzahala - the neighborhood of Ariel Sharon, Moshe Dayan, Itzak Rabin and many more generals from the '60's & '70's. This is followed by my Israeli Airforce service as a captain during Antebe Operation ('76) which leads to my revelations about the Palestinian tragedy in the inexorable occupation that my country has continued since 1967. Yet, the stories soon give an opportunity to look at the Middle East with the realization that as long as Israel is in the role of the victim in this continuously tragedy, nothing is going to change. This film is my elegy to my lost beloved righteous homeland.

My Terrorist is my cinematic journey to convince those around me and myself that it is time to forgive; the Israeli occupation over 35 years plays a major factor in the fact that the Palestinian terrorism still goes on, and reconciliation is better than revenge. The film therefore follows my corresponding with Fahad Mihi, my visit in prison and my bewildered emotions when trying to help in obtaining his release interwoven with my personal background. In this current climate are my hopes for reconciliation and a peaceful future for my daughters too much to ask?

I hope you will enjoy watching My Terrorist and that I will be able to convey to you a reconciliation message that will open your heart.

Yulie Cohen Gerstel,
May 2003

MY TERRORIST

interview with the filmmaker

BBC

Tuesday 30 October 2002

Yulie Cohen Gerstel discusses Israeli reactions in her attempts to free a terrorist and how her daughters have dealt with these efforts.

BBC Four: Why at this point in your life did you want to meet the man who shot you?

Yulie Cohen Gerstel: In 1993 the peace process really seemed encouraging. I started to think about this guy whom I met in 1978 and then again in court in 1979. I thought to myself if their leader can shake hands with my leader then why shouldn't I shake his hand and reconcile? I started to look for him in the Palestinian Territory and couldn't find him. I was sure he was somewhere here because, as I say in the film, I knew that the Iraqi terrorist who shot Argov, our ambassador, in London in 1982 had been released for years so I was sure that Fahad was also out. Surprisingly I didn't find him here so I met a British producer in Israel and asked him to help me perhaps find him in Britain - and he did.

BBC Four: The film's been shown on Israeli television. What's the reaction been there?

Y C G: The reactions were mixed. People are calling this a controversial film - some love it, some hate it. Nobody is indifferent.

BBC Four: Were you expecting that?

Y C G: Yes and no. In a way I was a bit surprised by the negative comments. But I realized that when people didn't agree politically with what I was doing they could not see how personally important my journey was. I guess because of the terrorism that's still with us here every day it is impossible for people to feel any compassion.

BBC Four: Do you feel any optimism at the moment?

Y C G: I'm very pessimistic. Very pessimistic. I've just started my next movie which will be *My Colonist* and deals with Settlements. For 35 years every Israeli government has encouraged settlement in the West Bank. Almost 400,000 Jewish people are living there. It is so huge. You wonder whether Israel ever wanted to have a Palestinian state over there.

BBC Four: How have your daughters dealt with your efforts to free Fahad?

Y C G: There were times when my eldest daughter said she didn't think it was a good time to help him. When I finished it last July I wasn't sure if I wanted to release it yet so I had a conversation with them. They told me if I'd made all this effort and come all this way then I should put it out. I told them they might pay a price. We had one phone call after the broadcast on Israeli television from a math teacher I'd met before the film came out and whom I had asked to give my daughters private tutoring. She called me and said, "Mrs Gerstel..." - before that I'd always been Yulie to her - "I can't teach your daughters. Something came up." This is one of the things that personally affected us.

BBC Four: Are you aware of what Fahad's situation is now?

Y C G: On purpose no. He didn't want to be exposed in the film and I cooperated with this. I didn't want to know what was going on with him so when people ask me I really don't know.

T2 reportage

Two decades after she escaped death in a terrorist attack in London, former El Al stewardess Yulie Gerstel met the Arab who tried to kill her. Now she is campaigning for his release from a British prison. Interview by **Sarah Zebaida**

Once I had met him, I forgave him

The Europa Hotel, Central London, August 1978. The Israeli crew of El Al Flight 016 from Tel Aviv to Heathrow had arrived at their London hotel. The stewardesses, conspicuous in their orange uniforms, had just got off the shuttle bus when one of them, Yulie Gerstel, then 22, noticed two Arab men standing near the hotel entrance. She pointed them out to her colleagues but, seconds after the crew entered the hotel lobby, the men opened fire with machineguns.

One stewardess tried to escape but in her panic ran straight into one of the terrorists, who had just pulled the ring on a hand grenade. Both were killed instantly; their deaths foiled a plot to throw a score of hand grenades into the lobby, and to shoot any fleeing survivors. Another stewardess was seriously injured when a bullet lodged in her brain. The second terrorist, Fahad Mihvi, a 20-year-old Arab, tried to flee but was caught near by.

Gerstel says she was lucky. She escaped with injuries to her arm and hand from grenade shrapnel — and a trauma that was to last for more than two decades. Gerstel had just completed her military service as an officer in the Israel Defence Force (IDF). Mihvi was an aspiring terrorist from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). A year later she was a principal witness at his Old Bailey trial. Mihvi received four life sentences for murder, attempted murder, possession of firearms and possession of explosives with intent to kill.

Her third encounter with him

forms the basis of a film, *My Terrorist*, to be premiered later this month at the Jerusalem film festival. This is Gerstel's account of how the shooting shaped her life. It is also a plea for peace.

For 22 years after the court case, Gerstel repressed her harrowing experience in Central London. In the manner that Israelis have mastered over decades of tragedy and bomb attacks, she carried on with life, concealing her suffering, marrying and bringing up two daughters in Tel Aviv.

During that time, Israel's war-and-peace rollercoaster saw the historic Camp David treaty with Egypt in 1979, the Lebanese war of 1982, the first Palestinian uprising in 1987, the Iraqi Scud missile attacks in 1991, the Oslo peace treaty with Jordan in 1994, the assassination of Israel's Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, in 1995, and the first spate of suicide bombings in 1996.

The election of Ehud Barak as Prime Minister in 1999, followed by a boom in tourism during the millennium year, gave Israelis a new feel-good factor. The Pope visited, Israel won the Eurovision Song Contest and

the Miss World contest (small things imbued with importance in a nation that had long felt isolated) and there was a general assumption that peace in the Middle East must happen soon. When the long-awaited summit at Camp David with Palestinian, Israeli and American leaders was announced in June 2000, Gerstel began to feel that she might be able to come to terms with her traumatic past.

She met a tour guide who had been organising visits to Gaza and its refugee camps. She befriended Palestinians in Gaza and in a refugee camp in Nabulus. She invited them to her Tel Aviv home and accepted their dinner invitations.

"They did not want to throw us into the sea or for any harm to happen to us," she discovered. She had already developed her interest in film-making, and in 1999 produced a documentary about a former terrorist in the PFLP who had been exiled to The Netherlands. She found him and his family to be "very nice and interesting people", and abandoned her old stereotypes of Arabs.

Gerstel's visits to Nabulus ended with the beginning of the intifada and were replaced by a relationship that has come to be known among Israelis as the "bomb call", the reassuring stream of phone calls made by friends and relatives to each other in the aftermath of bomb attacks. Gerstel's Palestinian friends "phoned us each time there was an attack in Tel Aviv, and we phoned them after IDF incursions", she says.

These relationships made her think about Mihvi. "I became curious about what had happened to this guy," she says. "I

'We must overcome our fears by looking each other squarely in the eyes'



Yael Gerstel and her daughters. "Mihy has spent 24 years in prison and paid the price. He has a message for the Palestinian people that I respect"

thought it would be a good time to meet and shake hands."

She began searching for him in the Palestinian territories, reasoning that had he been sentenced in Israel, he would almost certainly have been freed. But when she failed to find him, she began to look in Britain, where she eventually located her former assailant inside Dartmoor prison and wrote him the following letter on July 18, 2000.

Fahad, salams.
How are you doing? What is your day like? Do you read newspapers? Are you aware of the Camp David agreement? I've been trying to figure out what happened to you personally and to Palestinians in general that

turned us to be enemies. My great-great grandfather came to Palestine from Algeria at the beginning of the 19th century. Where were you born? Where did you grow up? What was your personal motive for joining the PFLP?

Sincerely,
Yael

To Gerstel's surprise, Mihy replied with words of remorse. On August 8, 2000, he wrote: Yael, shalom.

Thank you for your letter. Let me first apologise for the pain and anguish I caused you and others all those years ago. I can only say that I deeply regret it, and I'm not the same person today. I have turned away from political violence and am now

very pro-peace. I believe the only way to reach a settlement is by dialogue and mutual respect.
Please forgive me.
Yours,
Fahad

More letters were exchanged, in which Mihy explained that he had become involved in terrorism as a glib youth. Gerstel decided to meet her assailant again. She visited Dartmoor on September 15, 2000. "It was an incredibly emotional experience, and very loaded," she says. "We were both ready for it. He spoke non-stop and I was really quiet. I wanted to know about the details of the attack, and he didn't want to speak about it. The hour-long visit in the prison passed very

fast and when the bell rang I wanted to leave and he asked me to stay a bit more. When I stood up to go he asked me 'Please help me to get out'. So it was a human encounter after all."

"Immediately after meeting him, I was able to forgive him. The impression I got was that the man I was sitting across from was not a violent person."

But, Gerstel discovered, Mihy was trapped. The PFLP wanted nothing more to do with its failed hitman. British law rules that non-British subjects convicted on murder charges must be deported after completing their sentence, but Mihy is stateless. "He is rotting in jail and could end up serving



Newspaper coverage of the attack in Mayfair in August 1978

the rest of his life behind bars," says Gerstel.

The timing of their jail rendezvous was also inauspicious. A fortnight later, on September 28, Ariel Sharon, then the Israeli Opposition leader, made his fateful visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, giving the Palestinians a pretext to ignite their second intifada. In those early months of fighting a reconciliation between a Palestinian terrorist and his Israeli victim seemed almost perverse.

The sensitivity of the subject could hardly be greater. The PFLP is still active in its struggle to create a "Greater Palestine", pushing Israel back to its 1948 borders, and has claimed responsibility for numerous recent attacks, including the assassination of Rehavam Zeevi, Israel's Tourism Minister, last year.

The film shows Gerstel's horrified reaction to the events of September 11. A week later she is still shellshocked, and tries in vain to reply to Mihy's latest letter in her previous conciliatory tone. She finds it impossible to feign compassion or interest in his plight and tears up the letter.

"I felt this big, overwhelming fear and it took me a while to get back to my senses," she says.

"I realised that fear takes us to irrational feelings, like hate and lack of forgiveness. But these aren't necessarily the right feelings, as I still forgive Mihy. He has spent 24 years in prison and paid the price. He has a message and a solution for the Palestinian people that I respect: he believes in dialogue, and non-violent means. This is different from the 9/11 bombers. I have no idea what they want; they are impossible to negotiate with."

Gerstel also describes her fears as the mother of two teenage daughters living under the constant risk of an attack in Tel Aviv. "At home, we are constantly negotiating on where to go, and whether to leave the house at all. The personal is intertwined with the political."

The film was funded partly by the BBC and will be shown on BBC Four's Storyville later this year. Exceptionally, given its subject matter, it also received funding from Israel's New Foundation for Cinema and Television, though neither of the two main local television channels has agreed to broadcast it.

"My journey is about trying to figure out what happened to us Israelis and Palestinians that made us become enemies," she says. Gerstel concludes that Israelis themselves are, ultimately, responsible for ending the constant attacks on their civilians: "If we don't stop being victims, we victimise ourselves; we must overcome our fears by looking each other squarely in the eyes."

Her uncompromising views on the need for Palestinian statehood bring her to the conclusion that "the terror attacks are self-produced by the occupation", a view rarely voiced in Israel, even by left-wingers.

The film has led to Gerstel being branded a "traitor" by one radio commentator, and, writing in the tabloid *Yedioth Aharnoth*, the columnist Aharon Meged has described her and other directors who have found international success with films about the Middle East conflict as "parasites eating away at the foundations of the State of Israel".

Gerstel rejects the criticism: "I was a patriot in the late 1970s. I'm the same patriot today. I wish only the best for Israel and there are times when you have to be critical of your own state's policy. It's hard for Israelis to see these films and be critical of them and, maybe, to feel bad."

Gerstel's response to Mihy's prison plea is likely to compound the controversy. In May 2001 she wrote a letter of support to the Home Office Parole Board, and Mihy, now 44, has since been transferred to Brixton prison and regraded, from category 8 to the lower-risk category C. He has a date for another parole hearing.

APRIL 26, 2004

EYE ON TV

by Roger Catlin

Searching For Personal Peace In World Torn By Terrorism

When a terrorist opened fire on a London bus full of El Al flight attendants in 1978, killing one, Yulie Cohen-Gerstel was one of three wounded and testified against the assailant. Fahad Mihi was sentenced to four concurrent life sentences.

More than 20 years later, the Israeli-born Cohen-Gerstel, who literally grew up in the military neighborhood where Ariel Sharon and Yitzhak Rabin lived, assumed Mihi had been one of the many political prisoners released during the Oslo peace accords. But she checked and found out he was still imprisoned in London and had lost all contact with family or any organization.

Long troubled by the seemingly endless conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, she wondered whether reconciliation was ever possible and whether she could ever give up her hatred. She became a controversial figure in Israel by deciding to forgive Mihi. She appeared on talk shows, was bitterly rebuked at rallies and went to visit the prisoner in London. She was on her way to writing a letter recommending his parole when the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, occurred, shattering her beliefs and rekindling her hatred.

Can peace ever come to the Middle East? Cohen-Gerstel wonders even as she tries to keep her teenage daughter indoors and off of buses that may be a target of the next suicide bombers. Her grand gesture of reconciliation and her second thoughts make for an unusually compelling first-person documentary, "My Terrorist" (Sundance, 9 p.m.), that poses questions for every thinking world citizen.