

The Good Old Days in Pardess Katz - an article by Shlomi Hatuka

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I pondered about how to start writing about this film - this is a new film on the abducted children from the Yemen, the East, and the Balkans? Or perhaps - here we have another outstanding reflexive film? Should I first discuss the missing person - the film director's uncle who, as an infant, disappeared from hospital - or the director, who acts in the film? Is it a documentary, or a feature film?

It's hard to know where to begin, because the director blends those two foundations, refusing to give up either one. Simultaneously it's a documentary and a directed film, about people who are present, and someone who is missing. The film's protagonist is both the uncle whose whereabouts is unknown, and also the director-nephew and his relations with the family which he abandoned. Shortly after the film begins, viewers understand that the director's uncle, the son of the Tunisian grandparents shown in the first frames, disappeared from Malben hospital in Pardess Katz in the early 1950s, as an infant. His mother was told he had died, but never saw his body. Over time, the parents realized they had been tricked. The film follows others made on the issue of abducted children from the Yemen, Arab nations, and the Balkans: **Down a One-Way Road** by Tzipi Talmor, and Nitzan Gilady's **In Satmar Custody**. Unlike them, this film about the heartbreaking abductions, also applies analogy - Barak puts himself into the shoes of the lost son and, as if settling a monthly grocery bill, performs a reckoning with himself.

The affair of the lost Yemenite, Mizrahi, and Balkan babies unfolded in the first two decades after Israel was established, peaking in the 1950s. Thousands of children were abducted from Mizrahi families, mostly Yemenite but also Moroccan, Tunisian and others. Parents were told that their children had died in hospital, but never saw the body or a grave-site, and were shooed away by the medical staff. It occasionally happened at infant homes in the transit-camps, where parents were told their children had been hospitalized. Years later, some of the lost children were found in Ashkenazi families; others were found overseas. Greed, and a racist ideology that served its purposes, were behind the abductions. Several nurses who testified at a state commission of enquiry incriminated their colleagues, revealing their prejudices at the same time: "...they'll be better off in another family," said Sonia Milshtein, a nurse.

It seems that the film's director engages with that sentence in a different, ironical way. Totally different because Pardess Katz is a notoriously tough neighbourhood liable to lead many into crime. And precisely because of that prejudice and oppression, it became a renowned ghetto. The director's uncles, who stayed in the neighbourhood, became criminals, or in the best case stayed there but didn't become criminals (meaning - it's all relative. One uncle confides that he never sees his brothers because of their criminal lifestyle. "And you never stole?" the nephew-director asks him. He shrugs - "only cars...". Another one never found a life-partner - a different way of escaping the destiny forced on him, and from the neighbourhood which has no way out).

Once, abduction was almost the only way of leaving Pardess Katz, though not the only one, for the nephew managed to get out. Now he's back - either as himself or his uncle's ghost - toting an expensive camera and performing a reckoning - with himself, his uncle, with the Ashkenazim, the present-absent on their own behalf, and the gods of fate. Though rarely named, they are largely responsible for the fate of his brothers and parents. His grandparents, born into a glorious tradition (the synagogue, the grandfather's pride and joy, is an apt metaphor), were housed in a ghetto, robbed, stripped of their dreams and of any capacity to express them. If that wasn't enough, their oldest son was abducted; as if they wanted to tell them, we've taken everything from you, and if you don't get it, we've taken your baby too, and now you're sure to understand.

The film director's uncle, just out of prison, shows how the missing and the present are intertwined. His teenage dream of playing the trumpet led him to steal an irresistible, gleaming trumpet from a shop-window; that's where his criminal record began. But how else could he lay his hands on a trumpet and work toward his dream? Even a dream which impelled him towards a career in crime (he later admits that he married an Ashkenazi woman to feel he belonged, to prove something to himself and others). Unlike his uncle who lusted after a trumpet and couldn't imagine any other way of fulfilling his desire, the film's director turns up in the neighbourhood with a fancy new camera he's just bought, and roams the local streets with it. If he'd remained in Pardess Katz, it couldn't have happened.

So, was he right to leave the neighbourhood? Did it give him the only chance of succeeding in life? Seemingly, his uncles convince him that's the case. But only seemingly - and it's not easy writing this. More than the film's being a genuine attempt to explore the affair of the abducted babies, and the traces of his lost uncle, it attempts to discuss fate. Should he really have stayed in Pardess Katz, never left it? Is he different from the uncle, is he guilty for leaving it? His uncles went round in impenetrable circles: one in and out of jail, another wandering the neighbourhood with a horse and cart, praying and seeking a bride, while the third always comes back to live in his parent's home. And what of the lost uncle? We can assume that he succeeded in life, after leaving his unknown family and neighbourhood behind. Perhaps this is what the director feels, but the guilt-feelings and the people who remained behind are hard to ignore. Like a criminal returning to the crime-scene, the director goes back to Pardess Katz and the family, until it becomes unclear if he's actually seeking his uncle, or maybe looking for trouble, as if he deserves punishment.

The film's photography is fabulous. It projects a sense of stasis, of a place where nothing moves except the ones who escaped it. There is also a sense of stasis in the filmmaker's psychological condition, as if the repressed trauma is surfacing, and he cannot break free of the trauma. The director's character in this film reminded me of Elia Suleiman's character in his films. Though he isn't always silent, like Suleiman, he frequently sits mute, or traverses his childhood neighbourhoods trying to decode the sights and memories. His character is the plot's central axis, often without his speaking at all. He frequently sits and eats his grandmother's traditional delicacies, tastes the lost flavours, and roams the neighbourhood, exploring the abandoned scenes. He cannot really control what happened then, and what is happening now.

Sergio Leone's magnificent film **Once Upon a Time in America** also came to mind. After years in exile, after extricating himself from his hardscrabble childhood neighbourhood in Brooklyn, the protagonist - played by Robert de Niro - returns. Was he right to leave? Maybe. Did it come at a price? Undoubtedly. But what can you do, the neighbourhood is like your mother's womb - both embrace you life-long, if you like it or not.