

Libya: Flashbacks in Tripoli

By Michael Gleich

A Tripoli trauma centre tries to heal emotionally wounded children and youth caused by war

Lights, camera, action! Feras is on the steering wheel. His friend is on the passenger seat; he is bleeding from a bullet wound to the calf. In the back seat, the captive. Guarded at gun point by a third friend. They race through the streets. Tripoli, at over 100 kilometres per hour. Behind them, the pursuing car. They shoot at the captive's car. Feras shoots back, with a gun in one hand and the other hand on the steering wheel. His car starts skidding towards the left pavement. Film tear. The man is lying on the ground. In front of a pharmacy. Dead. A bullet through the chest. Then it becomes clear: a distant uncle. Feras can only see the thick trickle of blood flowing down the pavement. Then everything starts anew. Feras is on the steering wheel. His wounded friend is on the passenger seat...

A never-ending horror film. And only one spectator. He cannot believe what he is seeing. Feras, 26, who studied law and wants to become a successful car salesman. Feras, with string lower arms and soft eyes, which are lowered when he tells his story: In his head, he repeats this sequence over and over again. Not because he likes it. The opposite. He is haunted by feelings of guilt and shame. There lies the uncle, there is the pool of blood. Shot. Did he shoot him? By accident? Did he shoot his uncle by accident? Shame, did he bring shame upon himself? Hash helps. Feras smokes. It does not delete these images. But they momentarily do not matter to him. No matter what happened. What can you do? What happened, happened. When the smoke gives way, the images return. He can't rely on a lot. That, he is very sure of.

Flashbacks is the name of the trauma which Feras suffers. One Experience destroys the mind's comprehensive facility. Too much, too big, too disturbing. That's why the memory always returns to this point. Freezes as a still image at that point. Like someone who restlessly seeks redemption, only to land in his own self-accusation.

The car chase through the Libyan capital happened two years ago. That Feras even knows what flashbacks are and what it does to the mind, is thanks to Nayla, his psychiatrist at the Libya Youth Center (LYC). Officially, she works in a very normal youth centre. According to its Facebook site, it's about self-development. In reality is the LYC the only trauma centre in Libya. Trauma is a taboo concept in a society which cherishes patriarchs, the strong, the warrior. Weakness is almost the same as idiocy. Trauma sufferers who openly address the subject are treated as insane by their families, according to Nayla. As a result, many keep their experiences of the 2011 civil war a secret.

War perturbs. The evening news shows a type of overview, which spares its viewers. The close-ups, taken by those in the thick of it, are more tormenting. The sister who is kidnapped by Gaddafi's soldiers, the mutilated face of a torture victim, the friend who is torn apart by a grenade in front of one's own eyes. These movies are only visible to those affected. These memories become a chamber of horror. On the outside, everything seems normal. A Smartphone is passed over a mocha in a café. On it runs a clip where a captured revolutionary's head is severed by a soldier. With a knife. He slaughters him, just how goats are slaughtered. This scene was filmed by

another soldier; militias took the phone with the video from him after he was killed. Young men in Libya have many of such videos on their phones. "Show me a gruesome video, and I'll show you one which is even more gruesome." Stolen traumas. Fruitless attempts to achieve closure. But being cool does not end the horror show inside the head.

In the war two years ago, Feras did not fight against foreign enemies. The revolution against dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi threw fronts straight through families, companies and football teams. Once friendly neighbours became hated enemies, students armed themselves with grenades, regular soldiers became killers who murder civilians. With over 40 years of dictatorship, hate would come to a head and disturb a whole society. In Libya, this was followed by a civil war which split the country and destroyed people inside. Nobody trusts anyone. Many scores to be settled. And too many open wounds.

And what heals?

LYC has created a peaceful and happy place right in the middle of Tripoli. After entering through the gate, awaits a quiet oasis near the busy Quadesia roundabout. Behind it appears a light beige villa-like building. In the garden, the sound of traffic is reduced to a mere rustle. Boys and girls play on the lawn, which is protected by walls. A refuge, even if it is just for a few. 400 children and young people are allowed in per season. "Yet the whole population is heavily traumatized", says Nayla. Usually professionally optimistic, she seems momentarily glum. She comes from Lebanon, has experienced four wars in her 32 years and still flinches every time a wedding takes place. Many weddings are celebrated in Tripoli, and firing Kalashnikovs into the sky is once again considered chic. She sees her origin as an advantage. "Libyans don't trust their compatriots", says Nayla, "because I am Lebanese, it is easier with me to be open with me. And they know that I understand what they have been through." The unsuspecting-sounding recreational offers set the framework for the psychiatrists of the centre to easily spot and treat disorders, without the knowledge of family members or neighbours.

One day, Feras appeared in the centre. With a mission – to get his sister out of there. She had been taking part in the programme for a few weeks. At home, she had spoken about things which seemed weird to Feras. Own experiences. Role play. Drawing her dream school. The Brazilian martial art, Capoeira. Talking about drugs. Above all, developing personal goals in life and own visions of the future – scandalous in a country where parents decide over the most minute details of their children's lives. And all, one imagines, in mixed groups, boys and girls, all together in one room!

At the behest of their parents, he entered the centre with a beating heart, but determined. He was welcomed by a pedagogue. He was allowed to experience the centre for one afternoon. And then he could decide whether or not to prohibit his sister from visiting. Feras took part. And stayed. He has since never missed a single group meeting. "I feel safe here", he states. "At the beginning, I found it unbelievable that the carers seemed to draw happiness out of the mere fact of me just being there. Meanwhile I know: Their happiness is real. I simply feel welcome." An atmosphere of trust also fostered by the centre's insistence on neutrality. Even terms such as "civil war" and "revolution" are forbidden, due to their underlying meaning. Adolescents from pro-Gaddafi families sit next to former freedom fighters.

For Feras, something which counts as rather sensational due to cultural traditions, is particularly helpful: Appreciation. Children are hardly ever praised in Libya. When they are challenged to portray adults in role play situations, they always portray the same characters: the teacher, the screaming pupil standing at attention; Mothers whose favourite tippie is “chayatouli rigi”: “You make me sick”; Fathers who beat the palms of hands with a stick. Nayla has spoken to many parents and feels helpless towards their violence: Their plan is: “Break the children’s will before they get too big for their boots.” A mother once came to Nayla complaining that her 16 year-old son was unsociable and if something could be done about it. After the psychiatrist asked some questions, it became clear: her son was too much to handle for her from an early age, too restless, too lively. She locked him into a wooden box for days. That helped. “She could not possibly have imagined how this could lead to his disturbed social behaviour.”

Those humiliated this way hide themselves away. They grind their teeth. And wait for revenge. The revolution against the dictator Gaddafi was also an uprising against Libyan patriarchy. The young had built up a lot of hate against the old.

Praise is an exotic concept in such culture. And in the centre, praise and thanks flow freely. For a drawing. A photo on Facebook. Openness whilst discussing drug abuse. Every verse sung by the little ones who are currently training in the subterranean music room is rewarded with a star. Once they achieve ten stars, they can choose their favourite song. Recognition is visibly benefiting them. Their eyes sparkle, excitement pushes them on to continue. Feras enjoyed this atmosphere from the beginning. He slowly built up trust towards Nayla. He agreed to personal sessions. The centre recommends these to all who took part in armed combat. “Most of them suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder”, says Nayla. Symptoms reach from disturbed sleep to lethargy and panic attacks.

Guided by the psychiatrist, Feras begins to diligently explore his own memory. Every detail of the day he raced through Tripoli could hold the key to solve the trauma. What colour was the car that followed him? With what gun did he shoot? How could he simultaneously steer and shoot? What was the uncle who was lying dead on the pavement wearing? His movie is being consciously reconstructed. Nayla observes how fear fades after each rerun. The day the reconstruction is complete, it becomes clear: The fatal bullet must have been shot by someone else. Feras could not have been the shooter. “It felt like a heavy weight had been lifted off my shoulders”, is how he describes his feeling after the breakthrough. However, one last doubt remains. After the last session with Nayla, the devout Muslim goes to the Imam at his Mosque. The cleric assures him: “You carry no guilt.” Since then is the memory of that day still vivid, but without carrying any fear or guilt. He no longer needs to smoke weed to view the images in his head from a safe distance. Feras is well on his way. Only his fingers, nervously nestled on his car keys, betray his inner tensions. He fears that the flashbacks could return, and the horror would start again.

The idea of the Libya Youth Center as a peaceful oasis was formed during the war. The leadership of Austrian oil corporation OMV, active in the country for decades, recognizes: The traumas which are being formed have to be healed. If not, the “new Libya” for which the revolutionaries fight, will remain an illusion. The centre was planned and entrusted to the Austria Hilfswerk for professional maintenance in December 2011, before the war against Gaddafi was won. Work began in the spring of the following year. Firstly, the upper age limit was raised to 25, to include the

“freedom fighters”, those young men of the revolution with the worst emotional wounds.

But the little ones also struggle coping with what they witnessed in front of their front doors.

What has Khalifa witnessed? All are standing in a circle. The eleven year-old jumps into the centre. Rolls on the ground. A quick look at the others: Are the others also looking? Then he jumps back into the circle. After singing, everyone lies on their backs, practicing relaxing breathing methods. Khalifa pokes the boy next to him. He beats his chest. Pulls his hair. Runs across the room. In every other nursery he would be the enfant terrible, with whom no one would want to play with. “Children like Khalifa desperately need the centre”, according to Sala, a minder. His intuition for the inner world of children is displayed by his ability to put them into a rhythm of action and relaxation. A water game on the outside lawn opens the outlet at the right time, through which excess emotions can flow out before they turn into aggression.

Khalifa was nine when the war started. One day the door was kicked in shortly after lunch. Many gesticulating men stormed into the house. They carried a body wearing a blood-drenched t-shirt. It was the body of Khalifa’s older brother. He had been fighting on the front near Tripoli. How does Khalifa get rid of this image?

These inner images have to become visible. And be lovingly seen. Sometimes it helps to draw them. Today’s theme is “What would be the best birthday present?” A boy draws a tank, covered in chocolate buttons. Another would like an entire weapons arsenal, from a pistol to anti-tank weapons, all with the exact classification. One drawing depicts a shooting between two street gangs, the people depicted as stickmen, the weapons realistically, to which the girl added her wish: “No more shootings at night.”

An older participant brought a photo from home. His five-year old brother lies half-buried on sand with his eyes closed. Next to him, his mourning sister. Elsewhere, mother and father games are played to learn roles. In Libya is “martyr and widow” more popular.

Wars rob childhoods. Nayla observed that “many of those growing up lack the characteristic carefreeness.” Even ten year-olds are made to behave like adults. Disciplined and self-important. Boys start to order their sisters around. Girls become chaste housewives. Carefree play is tossed to one side. The power to dream up new worlds. When Nayla asked the question of what the pencil in her hand could be in her native Beirut, the children answered: magic wand, moon rocket, chopstick... When she repeats this test at the LYC, the answer from the children is always a pencil. Fantasy is reawaken only after weeks at the centre. Tentatively, the pencil begins to fly. One cycle at the centre takes nine months. The healing of traumas, which should not occur in the first place, takes place within group and personal sessions, which are not to be called therapy. The main goal of the roughly 20 social workers, hosts and psychiatrists is to empower children and youths to develop a personal notion of their lives. One which excites and relates to personal talents. They are aware of how spectacular this approach goes against the traditions of a particularly conservative society. “You could call us the who-and-what-am-I centre” says the programme director Lamyia. The participants are not used to asking questions of meaning. The loss orientation amongst the youth is particularly great after the civil war. They become drifters. Young men hang around in cafes, young

women at home in front of the TV or computer. Other activities are rare. Good jobs, too.

Frustration is often released in beatings, which degenerate into shootings. Small wars out of boredom. Weapons are easily available. Hardly anyone has returned them after the war. Lamy remembers how a gun went off as she was painting a wall near the centre with the children. "I thought that the kids would panic. But nothing came of it. I could collect them calmly and bring them back. I could hardly believe how calmly they reacted." A trauma is a wound. Not only physical wounds have to be healed. Also emotional ones, maybe even more urgently. If not, then the ruling feelings become revenge, aggression and the disrespect to others. In people and entire societies. Countries like Israel and Palestine, at civil war for decades, portray far higher figures of domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape compared to comparable countries without a war background. Reconciliation in the long-run is only possible after the pain can be made visible and the suffering is recognized.

Whoever enters the Libya Youth Centre, will at first not recognize any pain or trauma. Children walk carelessly through the corridors, dancing takes place in the cellar, youths practice martial arts in the garden, 12 year-olds form a circle around the keyboard in the first floor to think of a hymn for their dream school. A very normal youth club, at least by European standards. The extent of the inner wounds only becomes noticeable after prolonged observation. Nayla summarizes the symptoms of traumas and their after-effects: "The kids pull their hair out, scratch themselves, suffer from sleep deprivation, can hardly concentrate, and jump at the slightest provocation."

Happy on the outside, darkness inside. Just like Mahmoud, The 24 year-old has absolved his first programme cycle at the centre. A good-looking guy with a sly smile on his even and bronzed face. His nose curls up every time he looks for an English vocal during a conversation, giving him an innocent and child-like expression. Only sometimes can bitterness be seen around his eyes. Mahmoud asks if he can show a few videos. From two years ago. Filmed by him and his friends. He opens up his laptop and delves into a war film. "Here we fought to liberate a street in Sirte," he comments about a clip, more solicitous than touched, "we are trying to break the tank, which is in reverse here. It belongs to Gaddafi's people. We broke it with an anti-tank weapon, a good shot." Pride plays a part, his voice is excited. He and his friends from Tripoli are seen on the wobbly mobile phone footage. They are wearing t-shirts, Bermuda shorts and trainers. They look like youths on their way to a holiday camp, then in the spring of 2011, when they joined the war. Some drove to the front straight from the lecture theatre. Mahmoud studied food technology, specializing in E. coli. He and his classmates bought their own guns. "I particularly liked the British-built FN rifle. It provides a good grip." Those with technical abilities amongst them converted a SUV so it could carry mounted weaponry.

Another video, young men smile at the camera, make the V-sign, victory, triumph. Mahmoud explains: "He was my best friend. He was later killed by shrapnel. And he had his right leg amputated. This one is dead, that one, too." He is saddened by the loss of his comrades. But they died as martyrs, says Mahmoud, "which makes it easier."

What persuaded him to the front? "There was real action there. The sound of bullets, the tanks, the fear. I cannot say what really fascinated me. They were simply cool

feelings running through my body.” It sounds like the intensity of life so close to death. “I fell in love with war”, explains Mahmoud.

He returned home after the victory of the revolution. At first, his family are proud of their first-born, the warrior, the brave one. But his aggressive behaviour becomes noticeable after some time. During an argument with a friend, he pulls out a gun, but luckily shoots at the ground. “In the family I am suddenly seen as ‘al-damwi’, as bloodthirsty.” He himself cannot believe it. “I knew I was nervous, yes, but that is normal. My friends who returned from the front were just the same.” He heard about the centre, applied, and was accepted. In one of the first exercises, he had to draw a quadrant. Four fields, about himself, his goals, his weaknesses, his strengths. “Simple questions really. They made me think about myself for the first time.” His strengths? “I get on with all people, even difficult ones.” His weaknesses? “I can be short-tempered.” He was convinced that he did not need psychiatric treatment.

Then occurs something which he still does not understand until this day. October 2012. He had been taking part at the centre’s sessions for a while when the city of Bani Walid, southeast of Tripoli, rises up against the interim government. Mahmoud is angry. The revolution seems to be in danger. Everything he has fought for is at stake. He wrestles with himself. His mother pleads with him to stay. His father, the undisputed chief, strongly forbids him to travel to Bani Walid. At first, he seemed to accept this. But he does not return from uni this morning. He one again obtains a machine gun and joins the militia. Within a few days, they “liberate” the town. This time around, his return is overshadowed. His father no longer speaks with him. Mahmoud feels ostracized. But also guilty towards his friends at the Libya Youth Centre, who desperately tried to discourage him, and with whom he had lengthy discussions over the peaceful future of the country. He now feels as a traitor to a way of life which he had accepted. “Since then is war ‘akbar adow’, my worst enemy.” He started taking therapeutic sessions with Nayla. They are taking effect. “Although sometimes anger takes over, and sometimes I don’t even know why. But I have learned not to immediately act on it.” Nayla calls this emotion management. Mahmoud has become one of the keenest volunteers at the centre. He has completed his studies in food management. “I want to take a leading position in the new Libya. I want to serve my country. That is my goal. I am happy to have a goal for the future.”

He keeps his FN gun in his wardrobe at home. Together with some other weapons he does not want to take about. “I will hand these over one day. But only to an authority that I really trust.” Thousands Of former fighters share his views: They remain ready. Mahmoud lives with an inner strife, which is typical for the Libya on the road to peace: whilst he takes part at “violence-free communication” courses at the centre, he keeps himself armed as a precaution. Just in case one day another dictator shows up and the horror film starts again.

Info box

Libya Youth Center

The centre provides a safe space for children and youths up to 25. Offers include spare time activities, mainly art-, music-, play-, cognitive- and psychotherapy. The programme is funded by the Austrian OMV trusts, organized by the Hilfswerk

Austria. Their Libyan and international works also train teachers, child minders and youth workers from Tripoli to correctly deal with children displaying behavioural problems. The Ministry of Education is considering opening centres based on the LYC across the country. So far, however, it is the only such trauma centre.

Further information:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Libya-Youth-Center/241157739311357>

<http://www.hilfswerk.at/hwa/projekte/afrika/libyen/libya-youth-centre>

Civil war

The uprising against dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi's regime began in February 2011 in the eastern Libyan town of Benghazi; he had ruled the country alone for 42 years. The war ended eight months later with victory for the revolutionaries. Gaddafi was captured and killed. NATO supported the uprising with aerial strikes. The struggle for a transition towards a western-modelled democracy continues to this day. However, many of the former revolutionaries do not respect the interim government and want to force through their own interests.