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*PEOPLE WITH MEDIA CONTACTS THERE, PLEASE ENCOURAGE THEM TO AIR THIS FILM!*

### *Marco Pasquini's Gaza Hospital*

If every building has a story to tell, then Gaza Hospital, a medical center-turned-refugee-shelter in the Sabra and Shatila camp, can recount a saga.

It is this saga that director Marco Pasquini sets out to capture using archival footage and testimonies from former voluntary medical staff and refugees currently living in the building in his documentary of the same name.

*Gaza Hospital*, produced by the Italian Suttvuess Corporation in cooperation with the Lebanese Umam Documentation and Research Centre and the camp residents, switches between past and present as it traces the history of this building and the stories of the people who live or have worked therein.

Whether through anecdotes revealed by the three former medical staff or by Abu-Maher, a refugee currently living in the building, or through footage of the bustling hospital in the 1980s, with a proud Yasser Arafat boasting about the soundproof underground operation room designed to function in spite of the Israeli-incurred mayhem, the documentary reveals a rich, albeit tragic story set in tumultuous times.

The senior hospital administrators – Dr. Aziza Khalidi; Dr. Swee Chai Ang, a London-based orthopedic

surgeon; and American Jewish nurse Ellen Siegel, who all served in the hospital amid the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the ensuing massacres – are filmed walking through the dilapidated building recounting their tales of death, chaos and hope. “We were a force of life during a whole massacre,” asserts Dr. Khalidi.

But it is the ten-storey-high edifice scarred by bullet holes and loaded with memory that is undoubtedly the protagonist in this documentary. The hospital until its fall served as a haven for the injured and fleeing Palestinians and Lebanese civilians looking for a safe dwelling in the violent 1980s. It also took in refugees after the 1985 “war of the camps” that saw the destruction of their homes, thus making it a “vertical refugee camp” overlooking Sabra and Shatila.

Abu-Maher, a resident of the building, is another key figure in the documentary whose tale mirrors the tragic fate of Palestine and its displaced inhabitants. Abu-Maher is said to have left Palestine as a baby following the *nakba* and came to Lebanon only to have his 13-year-old son, to whom the film is dedicated, “martyred” and his makeshift home and barber shop destroyed during the war of the camps. He then moved with his family and his barber shop sign to Gaza Hospital. The documentary shows him going about his daily chores in the shop, fixing the sign reading *Salon Alfeda 'a*, named by his son, and finally hanging it on the building entrance.

### *Glimmer of hope*

This glimmer of hope is echoed throughout the documentary despite the grim reality. Dr. Swee walks through the hospital recalling how they worked oblivious to the brutalities going on outside. “It is only when I emerged to the mortuary and saw the piles of human corpses that I noticed something was terribly wrong,” she says. She recounts how she often drove a van of supplies and kept aside some medicines and tips to hand out at the checkpoints in a bid to ensure a safe route to and from the hospital. She also seems to be quite stunned when she discovers men pumping iron in the basement of the hospital, which is now a gym.

Nurse Siegel is also filmed praying in Hebrew at the mass grave for the victims of the Sabra and Shatila massacre in a blunt reminder that the Jewish State is the one culpable for so many atrocities in Lebanon, not the Jewish community as a whole. Ellen, who seems to be on good terms with some of the current residents of the hospital, calls her experience at Gaza Hospital, in spite of the many difficulties and dangers, the most fulfilling of her career.

Although the film seems to successfully tiptoe around the messy politics that came into play during the 1980s, it does not shy away from naming and shaming the perpetrators of the wars and massacres. In a fleeting moment, not received with applause at the first screening in Beirut like other moments in the film, such as the footage of Arafat, Dr. Khalidi thanks the Lebanese for putting up with the Palestinian presence for so long.

While it is true that the armed Palestinian presence in Lebanon continues to have repercussions on state security, Abu-Maher told those at the Beirut screening, organized by UMAM D&R at the American University of Beirut, that the beleaguered refugee camps and their inhabitants are not purely “security islands”. The residents of Gaza Hospital and the adjacent Sabra and Shatila camp remain deprived of their basic social and civil rights.

A year after the brutal war on Gaza, the story of this hospital-turned-refugee shelter named in its honor is a tribute to a beleaguered but resilient people.