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The Green Prince – The Crucible That Forged an Unlikely Allegiance

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, March 12th, 2014

The Green Prince from Israeli director, Nadav Schirman, is the real-life documentary thriller that unveils the relationship between Mosab Hassan Yousef, the eldest son of a top Hamas leader, and Gonen Ben Yitzak, his true-life Shin Bet handler. The film premiered on opening night of the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, where it received the Audience Award in the World Documentary Competition.

Born and raised as a Muslim extremist “to hate and kill all Jews” (Mosab’s own words), Mosab was being groomed as his father’s successor. He was recruited as a teenager to spy on his own people under the code name of “The Green Prince,” and he described his experience as a collaborator with the Israeli government for over ten years in his memoir, *Son of Hamas*. As a captive in an Israeli prison, Mosab saw first-hand the randomness of torture perpetuated by Hamas prison leaders, and he began to question his allegiances. He came to fear that “cowards in the name of courage, were leading an entire nation to death.”

In recruiting Mosab, Gonen explains, “It was as if we were recruiting the son of the Prime Minister ... He was not just a source, he was there for us all the time.” Their unlikely partnership led to the arrest of top terrorist masterminds, prevented multiple suicide bombings, and uncovered critical secrets. For both men, loyalty to personal conscience would come to supersede all other competing loyalties — be these political, professional, or personal. Most surprisingly, having endured such a crucible, their commitment to one another became forged as strong as steel. The stunning documentary, *The Green Prince*, uses an exceptional case to hint at the possibility for deep reconciliation.

I had an opportunity to speak with Nadav Schirman, director of *The Green Prince*, in the lobby of the Yarrow Hotel during the Sundance Film Festival, just following the premiere of his incredible film.



Nadav Schirman, Director-Writer-Producer, *The Green Prince*.

Sophia Stein: How did you discover Mosab’s memoir, *Son of Hamas*?

Nadav Schirman: My mentor, Lisa Shiloach, one of the owners of July-August Productions in Israel, brought the book, *The Son of Hamas*, to my attention. I read it in four hours. This has happened, I think, maybe twice in my life.

I had directed a documentary film called *The Champagne Spy*, which they are making into a feature now. Then I made another film called *In the Dark Room*, and I was looking for a third film about spies.

When I read Mosab's memoir, it was an eye-opener about Hamas. As an Israeli, Hamas are our neighbors. They won the elections, they govern Gaza, and I realized that I knew nothing about them. Most Israelis know nothing about Hamas, other than from the service. So I decided to pursue it further.

I was introduced to Gonen by one of our associate producers. Gonen told me about his relationship with Mosab. I was really struck by this story. These guys are literally "best of enemies" that became "best of friends" in the process of building trust. So after I had met Gonen, my view of the project changed. It became much bigger than *The Son of Hamas*. It was about these two people coming together.

Then I had to meet Mosab — because I hadn't met him yet. I flew to New York, a half-way point between the West coast where he was living, and Frankfurt, Germany where I was living. The day I met Mosab was actually a very special day. As I was waiting in the New York hotel lobby to meet Mosab, came the news flash that Osama bin Laden had been assassinated. Within two minutes of this announcement into the lobby, walks Mosab. He was like, "We have to go to Ground Zero." So within five minutes of meeting the son of a Hamas leader, I was in a cab with him going to Ground Zero where Americans were celebrating ritually, as if they had won the world cup. Chanting — "America, America!" — which was interesting in and of itself. But then, what was even more interesting was that Mosab was trying to join in on the celebration. When I saw this, it was a clear sign that Mosab was really trying to belong to this country that had given him asylum — whereas maybe ten or twelve years earlier, he would have been an Osama bin Laden fan! Mosab describes in his memoir that during the gulf war, they would be standing on the rooftops of the houses in Ramallah and cheer as the scud missiles would fly from Iraq to Israel. And here he is, ten years later, celebrating the death of bin Laden with Americans. That transformation was so big.

I am interested in themes such as "How do you define your identity?," and "What happens when you uproot yourself from your identity?" These are issues that I explored in *The Champagne Spy* as well. So after this meeting with Mosab, I just had to make this film.

S²: How faithful did you remain to Mosab's memoir?

NS: The memoir is about Mosab's journey, but the film is about this relationship. So the film tells a different story than the book. Mosab's memoir formed the basis for the film, the background research, if you will. In his interviews in the film, Mosab digs deep to reveal some experiences and emotions that are not in his memoir.

S²: You have said that "Both protagonists dared to put their lives at risk ... they each had a very strong moral compass and were not afraid to go against the tide in order to do what is right." This theme is so powerful and timely.

NS: Especially if you examine that region. They have been trying to make peace for a while. This is round fifteen(?) in the negotiations, or who knows what. One thing which became apparent to me as I was working on this film — in order to establish a bond, you need to get out of your

comfort zone and actually trust the other side. The bond between Mosab and Gonen exists because Gonen took the risk to trust Mosab. I don't know if Israeli leaders today actually trust the other side. And I don't know if the Palestinian leaders trust the Israeli leaders. Without that trust, I don't think anything can be achieved. In our story, trust is risk. It is the same thing when you meet somebody that you are interested in romantically, and you form a love relationship. You are taking a big risk. You can open your heart up to them, and they can dump you and hurt you. But if you don't take that risk, you won't get a chance.

S²: It is a love relationship between these two men –

NS: True love.

S²: Betrayal is another theme. This is a story of a son who betrays his father and his family, to do what he believes is right. As a result, Mosab is essentially an orphan as well as a political émigré today.

NS: That's very sad because he was very close to his family. Even though he was "betraying them" from their perspective — he still loved them very much. He told me that sometimes he would be on a mission, and he would have fifteen minutes in between meetings, and he would come home to do the dishes and help his mom out. Mosab said that he didn't feel that he was betraying his family because he was bringing money home and supporting them. On that level, he was there for his family all the time. It must be tremendously difficult for him. And for them, I'm sure they love him. These are all very intelligent, sensitive people. I am sure that it is tremendously difficult for them.

S²: Mosab was recruited at the age of seventeen, as a minor. What do you think about the idea of recruiting minors? Do you think Mosab was a victim?

NS: Well, seventeen or eighteen. We couldn't verify if he was actually seventeen or eighteen and one day. Listen, in one of the interviews, Gonen said, "War is an ugly game, and we played it ugly." The Shin Bet has one mission, they have to stop terror attacks. Whatever it takes. I lived in Israel during the first intifada and the second intifada, buses were blowing up everyday. Every day.

S²: I know that you worked hard in directing the film not to portray a political point-of-view. It became, you say, a mantra. Can you elucidate how you fought to remain even-handed?

NS: Listen, you can not help but be tainted by your own perspective or to see things through the lens of your culture. The fact is that I'm an Israeli. I grew up in Europe. I went to school in America. I'm a Westerner. So, I see things like a Westerner. Mosab, originally, is not a Westerner. They see things a totally different way.

Because this is a story of a relationship, it has to start on equal footing. So, as much as we could, we tried to be balanced. There are no good guys and bad guys in *The Green Prince*. Everybody is good and everybody is bad. It's a documentary film, but it is primarily a story of two people coming together. They have to come from equal footing dramatically.

When you look at Hamas, Hamas started off as a social and political organization. The fact is that Israel, in Gaza, actually was appreciative of Hamas in the beginning — because they were building clinics and schools, and that meant that the Israeli authorities in that region didn't have to deal with that. Hamas was also a counter-balance to the P.L.O. So at some point in the past, the relationship between the Israeli government and Hamas was very cordial. This was before Hamas developed the military wing. So Hamas is not all bad. Some perceive Mosab's father as a terrorist, some perceive him as a leader. I met a lot of Israelis who perceive him as a pragmatic person, with whom one can talk. That's good. So, there is also that side.

S²: The film reminded me visually of *The Gatekeepers*, and thematically, of *The Lives of Others*. Were you at all influenced by either of those films?

NS: *The Gatekeepers* came out as we were working on *The Green Prince*. I had planned all these drone shots, and I had all this footage that I thought this was quite innovative. Then I saw Dror's film, and I was like, "Man, you pulled the carpet right out from under my feet!" "Not at all," he commented, "because these things are part of spy-craft, and they are in all spy films, not only mine." Dror was very supportive. He is an amazing filmmaker. *The Gatekeepers* is a very important film. Dror saw an early cut of *The Green Prince*, and he loved it. He gave us some very good pointers, and I am very thankful to him. *The Green Prince* is a documentary film, yes, but it is a story. It's a film — you want people to enjoy it and to be touched by it. I believe that you have to use all the cinematic tools at your disposal to make it work for an audience.

S²: Congratulations on the distribution deals you just signed here at Sundance for the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand. Will *The Green Prince* screen in Israel and the Palestinian territories, as well?

NS: Absolutely. Our partners on this film, who have been supporters of all my films, are "YES, DOCU." They are massive supporters of documentary film in Israel. They are working with us to release *The Green Prince* theatrically in Israel. It looks like that may be in the spring. As for releasing the film in Palestinian cities, I do not know. I wish. But again, it is a matter of them being able to detach themselves from preconceptions. That's what we really wish, that people will come to see this film without pre-conceptions. There is a lot of interest here at Sundance. We have an amazing rep, Submarine Entertainment, who did *Searching for Sugar Man*, *Man on Wire*, *20 Feet from Stardom*, and they are now in talks with the relevant parties.

S²: *The Champagne Spy* is being made into a feature film. Are you going to direct that?

NS: Absolutely not.

S²: You are exclusively a documentary film director?

NS: Whichever genre is best for the story. I put my energy and my passion into telling *The Champagne Spy* as a doc because I felt that this was the best way to tell that story — because the materials were real and because the story was so complex and rich that I felt it could not be diluted into a fiction film. The same for this story. If you look at all my films, they're bigger than fiction. And then everybody wants to adapt them. Good luck. There is huge interest in adapting *The Green Prince*. But it is not something that interests me personally to direct because it would be like doing the same thing over again.

[Subsequent to this interview, Sixth Sense Productions acquired the option to adapt *The Green Prince* as a feature film, which they have partnered with Southpaw Entertainment's Richard B. Lewis to produce.]

S²: You had participated in the Los Angeles-Tel Aviv Partnership Master Class for filmmakers back in 1999? Was that experience influential to your development as a filmmaker?

NS: I was part of the first master class with Howard Rosenman and Susan Landau, and that experience put me on the right track. After *The Champagne Spy*, which was very successful, a lot of doors opened in Los Angeles. The master class gave you a sense of comfort and of confidence, that you knew what you were going to get into. And you felt that you were not alone. As an Israeli filmmaker, you come to LA after having gone through this master class and you felt that you were part of someone's family. The whole Tel Aviv-Los Angeles Partnership, they were there for me. I am totally grateful to have had this experience.

S²: In your youth, did you fulfill your compulsory military service in Israel?

NS: Of course. I was in school in America, and I came back to Israel to do my service for three and a half years. I was in the paratroopers in the beginning, and somehow, you can say that it was fortunate ... There is a saying in Hebrew, "Kol akavah le-tovah" ("?? ???? ?????") "Every mishap is for the good." I was actually wounded at the beginning of the first intifada — not in action, just in a training accident. Then I became a liaison to the United Nations, briefing them on the situation at the Syrian border, the Lebanese border, with the Egyptians, and the multi-national force there. I talked to my fellow paratroopers who went through the intifada, and they described how they were put into some very morally ambiguous situations. All of the paratroopers with whom I'd trained had wanted to serve and protect Israel. They were all of a sudden confronted with 8-year old, 10-year old, 12-year old kids, throwing bricks at them. And a brick can kill. So you have to protect yourself. The fact that it is a kid who is throwing the brick makes the whole situation very morally ambivalent.

S²: In 2001, somebody brought me some video tapes from Arafat's television station. It was a Barney-like show, where kids were singing about becoming suicide bombers.

NS: The kids disguise themselves as suicide bombers at their carnivals. You have 5 and 6-year olds wearing suicide vests, just for show.

S²: How do we overcome this type of brain-washing of such young children — on both sides?

NS: I think that that is one of the main points that they are discussing in the on-going negotiations — the educational process. Listen, education, that's the foundation. There was a very interesting film that was nominated for an Oscar and won the Emmy for Best Documentary in 2002 from B.Z. Goldberg called *Promises*, where he took several Palestinian and Israeli kids and brought them together. You see that when the kids are together and have personal contact, everything's fine. One-on-one, two-on-two, when you talk to someone, when you are in the same room, we are all humans. We are very close, actually. As soon as these kids went home, and they were on opposite sides of the fence, they couldn't meet anymore, and that's where they were subjected to a lot of misconceptions and hatred.

S²: You're a peacemaker. *The Green Prince* is an important film. I hope that a lot of people will get to see it.

NS: Thank you so much. Not me, it's the story. I just channel it. I literally see it as this as their story — the whole amazing, massive crew that worked on this film. We are channeling the story. What is remarkable at Sundance is to see how people have responded. You know, when Mosab and Gonen come onstage together, they get standing ovations. People are touched; they are in tears. Because their story brings you a sense of hope that individuals can come together. Mosab and Gonen, they are extraordinary characters, truly.

At times, we are all extraordinary, I believe. Each one of us in our lives, make choices where we say, "Fuck that!," and we just follow our own moral compass. People respond to that.

S²: That's the true hero.

NS: They say in Hebrew: "Ayzehu gibbor hakovesh et yitzro." ("????? ????? ????? ?? ?????") "A hero is somebody who can conquer his own" ... yitzro — how do you say "yitzro" in English? "Yitzro" is like an urge. The urge to do evil. The compulsion to do evil. In Judaism, the definition of a hero is somebody who can conquer those demons. And they both did.

*Top Image: Mosab Hassan Yousef, aka "The Green Prince," and Gonen Ben Yitzhak, his Shin Bet handler. **The Green Prince**. Photo courtesy of Sundance Film Festival.*

For more information, "[The Green Prince](#)" on IMDb.

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