

# Berlin Film Festival Part 2: *Midnight Traveler* —“Sometimes life takes you through hell”

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A number of notable films have been made about the tragic plight of refugees in recent years, with some winning prizes at the Berlinale. *Midnight Traveler*, however, which was shown this year and voted second-best documentary film by festival audiences, goes under the skin like no other.

The film centres on a filmmaker and his family, who documented their flight from Afghanistan on three mobile phones. During their flight, the filmmaker and his wife sent their mobile phone video recordings to a friend in America, the scriptwriter Emelie Mahdavian, who took charge of the film’s production.

In real-time and in painfully close proximity, the viewer witnesses how Hassan Fazili, Fatima Hussaini and their two daughters Nargis and Zahra, aged 11 and 6, are forced to quit their homeland, friends and relatives and begin a perilous journey through Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary, seeking to reach Germany and the European Union.

Towards the start of the film the cynical statement of philosopher Jean Paul Sartre is featured: “Hell is other people.” Hassan declares he does not believe this, but adds “sometimes life takes you through hell.”

The audience feels as if it is directly present when smugglers illegally transport the family across borders at the cost of all of the family’s savings. They are forced to wait months and even years in various camps and barracks along the Balkan route, cramped together unbearably, plagued by mosquitoes, or forced to camp out in the rain and cold in a forest before the last agonising sprint to the border. At the end of the film, following months of torment in a transit zone at the Hungarian border, the door to the European Union looms like a high-security prison, ensnared by walls and barbed wire.

In 2018, after three years of torment, the family

finally made it to Germany, but still have not reached the end of their journey. They have been waiting ten months for recognition of their asylum application in the state of Rhineland. Due to Germany’s residency laws, it was unclear for a long time whether the authorities would allow them to travel to Berlin to present their film.

Hassan Fazili is not a devout Muslim, as he explains humorously, despite the fact that his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and all of his brothers had become mullahs. Fazili is a film director and his wife Fatima an actress and cinematographer. In Afghanistan, Fazili is best known for theatre productions, documentaries and short films as well as TV series. Recently, Fazili made a documentary, *Peace in Afghanistan*, about a Taliban leader who sought to quit his group. The man was murdered after the documentary premiered and from then on Hassan Fazili was on the death list of the Taliban. The artists’ café he founded in Kabul was closed and the situation for his family became ever more threatening.

Europe was not the first destination chosen by the family. First of all they crossed into neighbouring Tajikistan, hoping to apply for asylum in Australia. They struggled to complete hundreds of pages of a request in a foreign language and were still denied a permit. From Tajikistan they returned temporarily to Afghanistan and consulted with relatives in Masar-e Sharif, where the German army, responsible for the Kunduz massacre in 2009, is stationed. On a hillside, an uncle shows the devastation left by the US-led Northern Alliance war against the Taliban which had laid waste to the city’s buildings. The situation in the region remains highly dangerous.

The family finally decides to flee to Europe. Hassan’s daughters, Zahra and Nargis, are sitting in

front of a map in the sun while the mobile phone camera is filming. “It’s a world map,” he says, and asks: “Do you know where we’ve been and where we are now?” Nargis, in her child’s voice, answers: “I have no idea.”

The children are the heroes of the movie. They laugh, play and initially regard their new situation as an adventure. They cry when they are bored, they miss their friends, are bitten by mosquitoes, and freeze in the woods under blankets which are too small—or, as happened in the Bulgarian capital Sofia, are attacked by a racist.

Nargis turned 14 at the end of the odyssey and is no longer a child. Prior to the last terrible stage of their ordeal in the Hungarian transit zone, which Nargis prefers to “quickly forget,” she spent her time in the sleeping quarters of a camp in Serbia listening to Michael Jackson on her mobile, and dancing. Her arms and legs move and sway to the rhythm, becoming more and more frantic, in a wild expression of her zest for life and her anger.

The ultimate nightmare is little Zahra’s disappearance for over an hour in the Serbian camp. Hassan later adds a comment to the film and says that at one point he imagined using the search for his child as a scene aimed at increasing cinematic tension. He then adds in a hushed tone: “I hated myself for the thought.” Naked reality on film—some audience members reacted with shock.

*Midnight Traveler* provides an authentic and moving portrayal of people just like us, who just happen to live in the wrong country at the wrong time. Their worries about their children, the spats between spouses, their affection for one another and jokes despite their desperate situation stand in sharp contrast to the cruelty of the state bureaucracy, the violence of the police, the fascist thugs who attack the camp in Bulgaria (and are protected by police), and the brutality of Fortress Europe.

The film is a sincerely made and at the same time devastating depiction of modern capitalist society. It reveals a thoroughly inhumane system that makes a normal life impossible for millions of people. It also gives a rare voice and face to those demanding their right to life and who are not ready to give up.

Hassan Fazili is valued by his fellow refugees as an eloquent speaker. They gather in a room and listen

intently as he says: “We are for equality of all humans, no matter their religion or skin color!” Hassan sounds convincing. “You never wanted to be a mullah,” his wife gossips to the cell phone camera and bursts out laughing. “And now everyone in the camp is demanding that Mullah Hassan be their leader.”

The movie ends abruptly. The Fazili family is still in the transit zone. Their future is uncertain. Nevertheless the film radiates confidence, despite the family’s ordeal and its shocking images. And at last, as the film ends, we see the entire family—Hassan, Fatima, Nargis and Zahra—standing on stage at the Berlinale.

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