

## In the Shadows of Murdered Innocents

By Leah Collmer / BauBau

The dead of winter. A capital city. Two missing children. A massive manhunt. The sins of two families would be revealed.

On a chilly, fateful Saturday in December, a 22-month old Jewish toddler and a five-year-old Muslim girl vanished independently from their homes in the same city. For an entire week, the disappearances of these two young girls would haunt a distraught country and, seemingly, their families. Within days of each other both bodies were discovered, revealing the most tragic and unthinkable deed of all. One murdered by her father. The other murdered by her uncle.

Jerusalem, Israel. On any given day banner headlines in all of Israel's most widely read newspapers report violence, terrorism, political unrest. Convictions of corruption and evil-doing by the other side are forever engraved in each nation's heart. Now, with the separate brutal murders of two little girls, one in East Jerusalem and the other in West Jerusalem, a divided city somberly discovers that the greatest evil and corruption is not conceived within another ideology or religion, but in the sordid intimacy of a family. A family of one of their own.

From December 7-13th, Israel held her breath for Hodaya Pimstein-Kedem and Nur Abu Tir; two innocent little girls whose names and faces, once anonymous, would become significant and memorable. Hope and solidarity illuminated the first few bleak, cloudy days of a city in the throes of a massive manhunt. In a race against time, abandoned apartments, garbage containers, sewage lines and caves were scoured incessantly. The girls' guileless faces burned in everyone's minds, their names echoed hourly in everyone's ears: "Hodaya. Nur. Where are you?"

Their disappearances sharply and poignantly paralleled each other beyond the date of their abduction and murders. The anguished cries of two distraught mothers, thousands

of nationwide volunteers, sweeping city searches and intense media coverage eventually disclosed family feuds, bitter betrayal, and revenge.

Under a grey, misty sky the fate of 22-month-old Hodaya Pimstein-Kedem would be disclosed on Tuesday, December 10th, three days after her disappearance. Her body was discovered in a shallow grave in a forest 10 minutes from her father's home. Worse was yet to come.

Wednesday, December 11th. After days of supplicating pleas to the public and media, the sobs of a grieving father grotesquely turned into a macabre, detailed confession. On the day of her funeral, Eli Pimstein, Hodaya's father, admits to murdering his daughter by drowning her in the bath, then burying her body in a grave he had dug one month earlier and had returned to three days prior to her death in order to deepen it. Ironically, it would be this fateful action that became the turning point in discovering Hodaya's body. An eyewitness who saw Pimstein altering the grave recognized him later during the intense media coverage and notified the police.

Facts surfaced about long-standing, bitter, personal quarrels between Pimstein and Hodaya's mother, Rom Kedem, who were never married and lived apart. Legal and personal arguments over custody and child-support emerged, along with the bizarre note Pimstein had written to his daughter: "Soon our souls will be united forever."

Hodaya's voice was last recorded minutes before her death. Seemingly innocent, but cruel in retrospect, Pimstein phoned Kedem on Saturday morning, leaving Hodaya's voice on Kedem's answering machine. No one except Pimstein knew that this would become Hodaya's last message. A final farewell.

The mystery of the fate of five-year old Nur came to a close three days later, exactly one week after her disappearance. Her body was found in a bag deep inside a drainage pit only meters from her home. A family vendetta, sparked by years of clan disputes and rivalries, festered among the limited details of her murder. The dozens of arrests and interrogations which surround the ongoing blood feud between the extended families failed to reveal any conclusive evidence before Nur was quietly buried in her village on Tuesday, December 18th. With a gag order shrouding her case, no other details would be released by police until nearly two weeks after her murder.

Nur's uncle, Majid Abu Tir, after deceptively participating in the many searches for his niece that had continued for a week, confesses to murdering her. Police arrested Nur's father, Ahmed Abu Tir, for interfering in the investigation, but released him after a few

days. Both Nur's father and uncle, who are brothers, underwent polygraph tests to uncover any missing link in Nur's case. Police declined to comment on what the test revealed. Several other family members remain under arrest, until police determine if Abu Tir received any external assistance in Nur's murder.

"Hodaya" means "Thanksgiving" in Hebrew. "Nur" means "Light" in Arabic. For a week thousands searched and prayed for the literal and symbolic return of Thanksgiving and Light to a city already under an overcast heaven. The private nightmare of every parent became a heartbreaking public horror. Even the intense emotional interest of the public and the extraordinary assembly of volunteers could not alter the grim truth of their fate.

Hodaya's and Nur's stories riveted an entire country. Did the essence of their beautiful names, presumably given with promise and significance at their birth, fail to resonate with their murderers as they called them one last time before beckoning them to their harsh deaths? Surely, their executioners knew their meanings. Their names were in their own languages.

Thanksgiving and Light prematurely and abruptly extinguished in winter's darkest hours. Home and family, once glorified as asylums, havens of tenderness and love, now irrevocably corrupted, betrayed their innocence and eclipsed their lives.