Global Campus of Human Rights

Podcast Series 2 – Hope-based human rights

Episode 4 – To hope for the broken
Marina Shupac

Hi, this is To The Righthouse, a new podcast series by the Global Campus of Human Rights. From scepticism to hope, from utopia to empathy, we discuss human rights, riding waves, but also signaling where the light is. This podcast was recorded in Venice, Italy, on the island of Lido at the Global Campus headquarters.

Graham Finlay (GF) – Welcome to this new episode in our podcast series 'Hope-based Human Rights'. I'm Graham Finlay and today I have the pleasure to host award-winning filmmaker, journalist and human rights practitioner Marina Shupac. Together, we will discuss practicing hope, and good examples of aspiration, solidarity and resilience as opposed to negative feelings of suffering. Welcome Marina. Thank you so much for being with us.

Marina Shupac (MS) - Thanks a lot for having me.

(GF) - Well, Marina coming from an ethnic minority, you are passionate about stories that diminish divisions between 'us' and 'them' and create solidarity among people. In what ways is hope a key for such solidarity and the empowerment of rights holders, be they minorities or people in situations of risk?

(MS) - Yes, thanks a lot, Graham. I think I will answer by mainly focusing on the concrete example from my experience of filmmaker and I will mainly talk about the short documentary 'Last chance for Justice', which I self-shooted and edited in Kyrgyzstan, and which was commissioned by the BBC. So it's an untold story of inter-ethnic violence [that] happened in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, which happened between Kyrgyz majority and Uzbek ethnic minorities. So my film tells the story of Uzbek minority journalist Azimjan Askarov who was imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit and who was imprisoned for life for basically reporting on the abuses [that] happened during this inter-ethnic violence. So I was following his wife Khadicha who was trying to advocate for his release. You asked me in which ways hope can create solidarity among people? So you know, my main motivation to make this film is to try to produce a story which would speak to people all around the world, even to people who never heard about such country as Kyrgyzstan, who never heard about this inter-ethnic violence, but who could see the story of Khadicha and Azimjan, who could feel connected and who would feel this urge to be part of their story, and to help them (in) one way or another.

And as a filmmaker, of course, I have different ways to tell this story. So I also had this dilemma: should I tell these stories through this victimizing-based approach or from the crisis narrative? Or should I tell the story through hope-oriented lenses? So for me, it was also the choice [of] whom I will give the kind of microphone to: to Khadicha and Azimjan or to perpetrators? Will I show mostly these horrific scenes of violence between these two communities? Or will I really make close ups of the resilience of these two individuals and of the whole community? So I tried to go with the hope-oriented lenses and I was really kind of proud of the results we achieved together with

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Khadicha and Azimjan because when the film was screened on the BBC World News, I started to get messages from people from really all around the world and outside of the human rights bubble, saying like: 'we've been so touched by this injustice, how can we contribute?'. A number of people, (they) sent a financial contribution for Khadicha. Some people they posted photos and messages of support for Azimjan, on (the) social media. I can also think of a very concrete example of a young artist from the UK, who painted a portrait of Azimjan and sent this to Khadicha. So this makes me feel that really, it's also about choices of storytellers, choices of filmmakers, which can really create (the) solidarity and connections amongst people who never knew about each other before.

(GF) - That's really exciting because as you say, it is very, very important to widen solidarity and widen a sort of concern for human rights beyond people for whom it may be their day-to-day work, or it may be their particular expertise or obsession, to people who want to promote human rights, but often don't really know how to. It's great that people got in touch. And it's especially good that people had such a positive response to what are some pretty terrible violations of Azimjan's human rights. I think you've said that, basically, he is the only person from the Uzbek minority - and Khadicha - who are prepared to talk about this, this very, very violent episode in which thousands of people were killed. And he was imprisoned unjustly, tortured, denied due process, and sadly, eventually died in prison. I mean, I feel like I'm only touching the surface of the details. And so I want to ask you about sort of the nature of his sort of terrible treatment at the hands of the Kyrgyz authorities, but at the same time also, about how he coped with it, how Khadicha coped with it while he was going through this particular ordeal?

(MS) - Yes, so, you know, Graham, I think the answer of why he was treated so badly is precisely because he was one of the very few Uzbeks who openly spoke up about this inter-ethnic conflict. And as a journalist and human rights activist, he was also documenting the violence. And, of course, authorities didn't like this. And he was also a human rights activist before this inter-ethnic conflict started. So for the security forces from this region, it was also a perfect chance for revenge to imprison the person who was exposing corruption and ill treatment all these years before.

And, you know, my main motivation, when I started to work on this story, was also based on my nature of being a human rights advocate. For me, I am driven by most of the injustices I see. Right? So I was really shocked when I found out about this inter-ethnic conflict. And they found out about this inter-ethnic conflict in 2015. So for me, as a person who also comes from this post-Soviet region, I started to ask myself why I didn't hear about this violence, about this conflict before. And that was really curious how people live there nowadays. So this was my main motivation to go to Kyrgyzstan and try to find answers to this question, but very quickly, I realised that indeed, Khadicha and Azimjan were the only Uzbeks who were ready to talk openly about what happened and what is happening with them now. So that's how I focused on their story. And then there was also another part on this journey.

So I made this film as a part of my master's studies at University College London. It was my graduation project. So when I was pitching this story to my class, to my professors, they also asked me a very important question: 'why should we care about the story of Khadicha and Azimjan?'. So why should we care? I think this is a very important question I'm asking myself now when I start to work on every other story as a storyteller, as a filmmaker, because I guess, for people who work in

the human rights field, it's very obvious - of course, we should care because it's a horrific human rights violation - but for people who live outside of [the] human rights bubble, why should they spend, I don't know, 30 minutes of their life, watching some horrific scenes and then feeling miserable, after maybe a pretty tough working day?

(GF) - Yes, I think that's actually a very, very good point. You know, was your goal to have people feel something different after they saw your film than just feeling miserable? Do you think there are sort of limits to what we can do for human rights if we simply want to sort of focus on the negative, which we very often do because in journalism, but also in activism, outrage really helps, it's a great motivator. But first of all, why did you want to do something a little bit more and then what more did you want to do and how did you do it?

(MS) - Yes, you know, how I wanted people to feel? I really wanted them to feel what I felt when I interacted with Khadicha and Azimjan. Because of course, before I met them, I was really thinking about this more like of a crisis narrative, like really thinking to show the scale of the violence, to try to describe the type of human rights violation people face. But then when I came to Khadicha [for the] first time, to talk to her in her house in Bazar-Korgon village, I think what really helped me to achieve what I achieved is that I came to her with an open heart, and with a willingness to learn. So I came to her really trying to understand her and without imposing my own agenda on what she's supposed to tell me. So I think, of course, if I would come to her and start asking her questions: 'okay, so can you tell me about the ways Azimjan was beaten, can you tell me how you are harassed by security forces?', which is, of course happening… (instead) I just sat there and tried to listen to Khadicha. And what she told me was really inspiring because, of course, she told me about all these types of violations, harassment, hostility, and hate speech she's facing almost on a daily basis from the majority of Kyrgyz. But she also proudly told me about the amount of support she and Azimjan are receiving from ordinary people from all around the world.

So when I was just sitting there, silently listening to her story, she started to really open up because she saw that I'm genuinely interested in her holistic story. I wasn't interested in her as a victim, I was interested in her as Khadicha who has a multi-faced personality. So she started to really share with me some sensitive and intimate moments. Like she brought me these huge bags with letters and postcards they received from people who were joining these campaigns by Amnesty International and other human rights organisations, where they encourage people to write a postcard to a prisoner. And she spoke with such admiration like: 'look, Marina, you know, people here, like there is someone from Japan - I don't know - from India, from Bangladesh, writing a letter to us, this is what makes us move on'. And then I was, again, just listening her, trying to really learn from her and I learned from her humanity, because, of course, I had my own expectation, I was thinking that a person who - at the moment when I met Khadicha, first of all, Azimjan was already for 10 years in prison - so I was somehow expecting to meet a person who is angry, who is angry on the system, who is angry on the, I don't know, Kyrgyz society. But I saw a person who is full of love. And this impressed me a lot. So that's how, you know, I came with the motivation to make a story about injustice. But because I was really open and willing to learn, and I came without this, my prescribed human rights agenda, let's put it this way, in the end, I made the story of injustice, but told through the eyes of love, this is how I see the film, which I made as a result.

(GF) - I mean, they sound like remarkable people. It also sounds like you became friends through this process. And you learned a lot about hope from them, because the details, as you say, are so horrible, but the title of Azimjan book is 'I am happy'. And I know one of the things Khadicha wants to do with all this support is to publish his book, and presumably not just in Kyrgyz or Uzbek, but in English and other languages. And how do you think they were able to keep hope alive, keep loving, sort of keep wanting more for their society and for ordinary people in their society in the face of all that? And how can hope and how can that kind of situated sort of hope, fix or at least address the problems of a society that lacks basic human rights?

(MS) - So what helped them to keep their hope alive, I think there were a couple of ingredients I observed. So first of all, is really [the] support and attention they received from people from all around the world. Like really these letters, the calls they receive, like small parcels they received from human rights activists from all around the world just with a simple message like: 'Azimjan, keep going' in different languages. Maybe they didn't even understand what it's said there, but the very fact that someone spent 15 minutes of their life writing that postcard, going to the post office, like this feeling that your story matters to someone, supported them a lot. And I will share also, from my personal experience of engaging with Khadicha and Azimjan for the first time, I wasn't really sure how they will perceive me because at the moment I started to make this film, it was more a student project, even though I was really motivated to do this film for international audience. But I didn't manage to secure any media support at the stage when I met Khadicha. So I was full of fears that Khadicha wouldn't perceive me seriously - that's, you know: 'who is this girl who came, maybe no one will see this movie?' - but no, on the contrary, when I came to her, she was so amazed. She was like: 'oh my god, I can't believe that you came here just to talk to me'. You know, this is what mattered to her. It didn't matter that this film [would] be seen internationally, for her what mattered was time and attention that someone shared with them. So I think we really sometimes underestimate the power of small steps we can do for others who are experiencing injustice, which is beyond our forces.

And then another ingredient is also the power of art. Because Khadicha and Azimjan, they were also artists. So when I met Khadicha for the first time, and she started to open up, she suddenly took me to a room in her house. And she showed me this amazing gallery she arranged in her house in this really small village. And the art was produced by her and Azimjan when he was still with her. And there were also artistic works produced by Azimjan behind the bars. So she was also telling me that this love for creating, the love for art, also supports Azimjan a lot. And also it was really impressive the way she described his prison conditions. So, you know, sometimes he would be held in the solitary cell. But the way she would describe it is not like: 'oh, you know, it's a horrific condition, it's a violation of this and that', but she was pretty much upset that Azimjan didn't have access to good lighting to produce some of his art. And she would also share that, how she would go to prison and when she would bring, of course, some warm clothes and food, she would also bring him flowers, because he also wanted to just paint flowers; he painted a lot of portraits of other Uzbek prisoners, who are, by the way, still behind the bars and imprisoned for life, and no one pretty much talks about them, but he also wants to experience pure human joy. And this also kind of impressed me - this hope which exists even in these human circumstances, this hope and possibility to experience joy, and connection, even in prison.

(GF) - I think that speaks to something really profound about human rights, which we often lose sight of, especially maybe people who are focused on the worst violations of human rights: that it's not just about having the basic rights and then maybe later on, we get to enjoy art or paint, or create or paint flowers or just have flowers in our vicinity, but that is as important to people, almost as quite basic human rights. I think we've seen a lot of that in the development space, that people when they acquire even the basics of subsistence or even without the basics of subsistence, actually look for things of beauty. And I think also, I was really struck by the fact that art played such a big role in their continuing to do what they do, which is… and it strikes me - but you are closer to them and to art, I suspect, than me - that a purely negative art, an art which only focuses on a negative things, probably isn't going to be very successful art. It could be good art, I suppose. But I don't know about these things. But you know, it seems like a purely negative focus would be… it just wouldn't work as a piece of art.

(MS) - Yes, I agree, because I guess, what I'm also trying to do is always put myself in the shoes of people outside of the human rights field: what would be your motivation to engage with - let's say - negative art? You need to make this conscious decision to spend your weekend, your free evening to engage with something overwhelming, and something beyond your control. So for me, it was also actually very much useful to study filmmaking at University College London, with students who are mostly from other fields of disciplines and they are quite far from the human rights field. And once I saw that there was Palestinian Human Rights Festival, and that was like: 'guys, let's go and see some films' and we went to see a movie, which would tell about human rights violations of children living in Gaza, and for me, as a person who is from the human rights field, it was, let's say, a light story. We didn't see scenes of violence, but of course, we'd see the conditions in which children cannot realise their full potential. But guess what? Most of my classmates told me: 'Marina, we will never go to a cinema with you. Because it's too much, it's too heavy'. So for me, I always come back to this example - why people outside of the human rights field would like to engage with my field? - because my motivation is really, to make stories for everyone, because I guess we already did a lot of stories only for this limited circle - human rights people - and it's not helpful.

(GF) - I think that's a really great story. Because you're right, that people like us can often just get used to it as it were, right? Whereas, I mean, it seems like it's a particular challenge for someone who works in various media, forms of media, like yourself, to try and communicate important things about human rights, including, hopefully, hope to an audience who may not, like many of us, sort of live and breathe human rights.

(MS) - Yes, that's true. And I think some of the ingredients, which I try to use when I create, like, let's say, hope-oriented stories, is of course not to overwhelm people with the level of injustice they see on screen, or they read in the text, but also provide a small window of opportunities where they can also engage with the right holders. Like, of course, it was maybe not a conscious decision for me, but in this movie about Khadicha and Azimjan, you see the scenes where Khadicha talks about the power of postcards and letters they received from all around the world. And, of course, this part, (sparked) an interest from people who saw the story on the BBC to do the same, because they saw that it will make them happy. So people were willing to do something for them.

(GF) - That sort of, already, answers a question I have for you, which is what can we all individually do, our listeners do, to promote the sort of human rights but also in a hope-based way? (And) one is to write to these human rights defenders to reach out to them and to support them in any way you want to do because I was really struck by when you said that Azimjan and Khadicha did not feel special, right? And they were surprised that you wanted to come talk to them, when Azimjan Askarov was a very well known human rights defender: he had been on the radar of the European Union and on the radar of Frontline Defenders, and all of the international organisations which are concerned with human rights defenders. So it's really, I think, good for people to hear that they still feel like they're isolated or people don't know about them. So what would you tell our listeners to do to promote hope-based human rights?

(MS) - I think if I would talk to our listeners who are themselves storytellers in one way or another, is to really ask yourself some questions before telling a story. So first of all: what is your motivation to tell the story? Are you motivated to just show the scale of the violence? If yes, maybe you need to dig a little bit more and reconsider your motivation, because your motivation will also drive the angle through which you will tell the story. And then I would also encourage listeners to ask themselves a question: whom do they plan to give the space or the microphone to? You know in (the) filmmaking there is also a term: 'close ups'. So who do you plan to put in the 'close up' of your story? And why? Are these the perpetrators? Of course, this is so important, but what would be the space of the right holders? So, I think if you reflect about these questions and you come to the right holders, to [the] protagonists of your story with an open heart, and without the pre-set(ted) agenda, and just listen to them, you will create something powerful, because while working on this and other stories, I also came to the conclusion that hope-oriented stories, we don't need to create them, they are already there. Very often, people who experienced this injustice, violence, they are people full of resilience, and we just need time and patience to give them the space and listen to them. So hope I think it's not something to be created out of the story, but it's something to be seen. So do you have the lenses to see this hope? It's up to you, but it's something you can also learn and train.

(GF) - Well, I really like that as a recommendation because it hadn't really occurred to me that in my day-to-day interaction with social media, that I'm not just giving out or broadcasting: I'm telling a story, I'm framing things in a way which professionals like yourself always think about - but I never think about - and so I think I'll try to - in whatever story I'm telling, even in my classes or on social media or in my interactions with people - to think about those issues which we very often don't attend to and hopefully make a slightly better job of communicating hope-based point of view. Last question, what stories are you working on at the moment?

(MS) - Yeah, so I'm working on a couple of stories. I would share about one of them. So it's a story about [the] unfolding humanitarian crisis in Nagorno Karabakh and I'm telling this through a personal story of a young social worker from a remote village in Nagorno Karabakh. So it's a work in process. As with the story with Khadicha, it's not easy to pitch the story at the beginning. But I'm very much motivated and motivated again by the resilience of the person whom I'm following, so I hope that very soon the story will be shared with a wider audience.

(GF) - We are really looking forward to seeing it and I'm sure it will infuse hope into what is a very difficult situation for the people in Nagorno Karabakh. And well, thank you very much Marina, we

will really try - and I really will especially try - to adopt your perspective on these narratives and on telling these hope-based stories in my life and in whatever work, small work I do, to communicate about human rights. So thank you for your inspiring work and best of luck in the future.

(MS) - Thanks a lot for this amazing conversation.

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