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WEICHOLZ GLOBAL FILM SERIES

WRITTEN PRE-FILM LECTURE BY DR. JOHN PFEIFER

TRANSIT Directed by Hannah Espia
Philippines/Israel (2014)



WEDNESDAY, JULY 14 AT 7PM

Almost every developed country around the world has relied, at one time or another, on foreign guest workers to satisfy their needs for cheap labor. The term “guest worker” comes from the German translation “Gastarbeiter,” used to describe Turkish workers who were recruited to help rebuild the infrastructure of West Germany after World War II. Most of the Gastarbeiter were men seeking to support their wives and children back home or to save enough money to bring their families to West Germany and secure a comfortable life for them in this new adopted homeland. Although most of them did not intend to stay in West Germany, many of the Gastarbeiter became permanent residents of their new country.

Since then, the term “guest worker” refers to foreign nationals who are permitted to work and live temporarily in a host country. Most guest workers perform low or semi-skilled agricultural, industrial or domestic labor, including jobs such as crop pickers, construction laborers, line workers, housekeepers, and caretakers. Most of these jobs are considered culturally or economically undesirable for the native people of the country benefiting from guest worker programs. A limited number of guest worker programs do recruit highly skilled workers in technology, science, and engineering, but almost all of these programs eventually lead toward a path to citizenship because these workers are considered more beneficial to the society than their low-skilled counterparts.

Unlike the Gastarbeiter and other legal resident immigrants, most low or semi-skilled, guest workers are not allowed to bring their families with them, and they are highly discouraged to participate in community life or to fraternize with citizens of the host country. These guest workers do not have the benefit of collective bargaining or unions to protect them from unfair labor practices by unscrupulous employers. Because these workers are not citizens or likely to become citizens, they have a limited number of rights to protect them against governmental policies that discriminate, disenfranchise, and dehumanize.

In addition, many guest workers are subject to mistreatment and abuse. Human Rights Watch, an international organization, outlines several ways in which guest workers are exploited, overworked, underpaid, and sometimes physically abused. For example, “15 Filipino hotel guest workers were forced to work more than their scheduled 40 hours a week. When they did not receive the overtime pay that their employer had promised, they complained to the hotel manager. The manager told them to be quiet or he would have them deported.” (The Borgen Project, Sept. 3, 2019)

In some countries, like Saudi Arabia, the consequences can be even more dire. Take, for example, the 2005 arrest and execution of a 24-year-old Sri Lankan guest worker serving as a housemaid and nanny. She was only one of the 100,000 Sri Lankan maids and nannies that are guest workers in Saudi Arabia. Rizana Nafeek was accused and indicted of murdering the baby for whom she was in charge of watching. Throughout the investigation, she claimed that the baby had died from choking despite her best efforts to revive the child. “She did not have a translator during her interrogation and the authorities beat her into signing a confession. Today there are over 100 guest workers sitting on death row in the country of Saudi Arabia.” (“The Abuse of Guest Workers in Saudi Arabia,” Sam Bostwick, September 2019)

According to a recent U.S. Library of Congress report (2019), guest worker programs exist in many countries, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Norway, The Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom, as well as the United States of America.

In order to better appreciate this film and to understand the issues surrounding the Israeli Guest Worker program, I will present information regarding Overseas Filipino Workers’ (OFWs) need for foreign employment and their migration to Israel, the 2009 Israeli Deportation Law that made changes to the status of children of foreign workers, including those that were born in Israel, and some interesting facts about the film and its director.

THE PLIGHT OF OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKERS (OFWs) IN ISRAEL

In the 1970s, the Philippines created a model of exporting labor that is still in use today. Many Filipinos choose to work abroad because of the low wages, scarce jobs, and political turmoil they face in their home country. Today, so many Filipinos work abroad that the Philippines’ economy is now reliant on the money sent home by OFWs. According to the World Bank, in 2017 OFWs working abroad sent the equivalent of more than \$28 billion U.S. dollars home to the Philippines.

According to the Philippines Statistics Authority, an estimated 2.2 million Filipinos, more than half of whom are women, work overseas in about 190 countries. That is about one-tenth of the population of the Philippines. More than 51% of those jobs are located in the Middle East, with more than 4% in the State of Israel (4% = 92,000 OFWs). (Philippine Statistics Authority, pas.gov, Total Number of OFWs Estimated at 2.2 Million, June 4, 2020)

Foreign workers, mostly women from the Philippines, began arriving in Israel in the 1990s to fill what was termed a worker shortage. Most OFWs work as caregivers for elderly and disabled Israelis, and today their number is estimated at about 60,000. (Dina Kraft, Haaretz, Nov. 7, 2019) At that time, the Israeli Ministry of Health sought to move long-term nursing care from hospitals and nursing homes to private homes in order to cut costs. The need for home health care workers in Israel skyrocketed and continues to grow as the average age of the elderly population is rising. In 2018, 26% of people age 65+ were over 80, compared with 14% in 1980. This percentage is expected to increase to 34% in 2035. (Brookdale.jdc.org.il, The 65+

Population in Israel, 2018)

Before 1990, these minimum-wage jobs with long hours were held by Palestinians. As restrictions were put on the movement of Palestinians following the first (1987-1993) and second (2000-2005) intifadas, migrants from countries like the Philippines began to fill the jobs. “Filipinos who come to work in Israel tend to work exclusively in health care services for Israeli families. In fact, the word caregiver is so closely associated with Filipino migrants today that Israelis use the nationality as shorthand. ‘I need a Filipino,’ they might say in Hebrew if they are looking for a caregiver.” (*America, The Jesuit Review*, Sept. 6, 2019)

THE 2009 ISRAELI DEPORTATION LAW

“Like other wealthy countries, including the United States, Israel relies on foreign workers to fill its labor needs. It is estimated that 250,000 foreign workers live in Israel, including some 40,000 Filipinos.” (Eloise Blondiau, *America, The Jesuit Review*, Sept. 6, 2019) Depending upon the source, estimates of OFWs in Israel range from 30,000 to 92,000. Most Filipinos enter the country on what is known as a caregiver visa, which allows OFWs to stay in Israel to care for elderly and disabled Israelis. Some OFWs live with the same family for years during what is undoubtedly the family’s most difficult times, working through illnesses and death. Visas may be renewed year after year, but transfers to other families or jobs must be approved and a new visa issued. Such transfers are usually limited to two health care assignments depending upon the number of years the OFW has been in Israel, and work change visas from caregiver to housekeeper are not generally approved.

Guest workers may breach the terms of their visa in any number of ways. Foreign workers are not allowed to bring family members and children to Israel even for a visit. Marrying or having a child in Israel is strictly prohibited. Becoming a parent while living in Israel violates the terms of the visa regardless of the nationality of the other biological parent. Moreover, children of Christian Filipino mothers cannot be considered Jewish nor can they apply for Israeli citizenship even if their father is a Jew and an Israeli citizen.

Prior to the 2009 Deportation Law, migrant workers who gave birth in Israel were allowed to keep their children with them until their work permits expired. Filipino children were given temporary permits to remain in the country as long as their parent maintained a valid guest worker visa. However, the 2009 Deportation Law adopted by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s government required the deportation of all children of legally documented foreign workers to be deported regardless of where the children were born.

In 2011, the government authorities modified the deportation law. The new policy required the immediate deportation of all children under the age of five years old regardless of their parent’s work status or place of birth. Due to intense criticism by Israeli citizens themselves, children of migrant workers over the age of five were granted exemptions from deportation if they met the following conditions: the child arrived in Israel prior to the age of 13; lived

in Israel for at least five consecutive years; spoke fluent Hebrew; and attended an Israeli school. This resident status would continue as long as their parents remained legally documented guest workers in Israel.

The deportation law also allows the Israeli Population and Immigration Authority to arrest, detain, and deport any illegal migrant workers and their children without a hearing. Guest workers who overstay or violate the terms of their visas are usually deported immediately, yet cases of undocumented adults and children born and living in Israel illegally for years and years are not uncommon.” (Eloise Blondiau, *The Jesuit Review*, Sept. 6, 2019) The unauthorized workers stay in Israel by working illegally for employers who cannot obtain legitimate employment permits, evading police and keeping a low social profile, and ironically keeping their children in hiding.

Although this film takes place in 2013, the plight of OFWs continues to this day. In fact, the rate of deportations has increased significantly in the last couple of years. *The Times of Israel* newspaper documents a 2019 case involving a 13-year-old boy who was born in Israel and spent his entire life in Tel Aviv. The young boy speaks Hebrew and cannot communicate in the language of his mother’s homeland. (Toi Staff, *The Times of Israel*, August 13, 2019)

According to the article, Rosemary Peretz, 42, came to Israel in 2000 to work as a caregiver, but seven years later, her employer died and she remained in Israel illegally, most recently working as a housekeeper. Ms. Peretz said she had never left Israel after her legal employment ended because she wanted her son to live in the country in which he was born. She said she did not have any close family in the Philippines, and that the boy’s father was a Turkish citizen who had returned to Turkey.

Ms. Peretz was arrested by immigration officials along with her son on a Tuesday evening for overstaying her work visa. “She has been here illegally for 10 years,” said immigration authority spokeswoman, Sabine Haddad.

Following their arrest, the mother and son were held in a detention facility at Ben-Gurion Airport. On the following Sunday, they were put on a plane to Hong Kong but pulled off the plane after numerous protests by local activists. An Israeli politician said they had yet to exhaust all their appeals at the time. Attorneys Carmel Ben Tzur and Boaz Ben Tzur filed an injunction to appeal the decision to deport, and the case was taken up by the Tel Aviv Court of Appeals.

Activists argued “that it was cruel to send Rohan — and other children of migrants — to a country they have never seen and where they do not speak the language.” A social worker who prepared a report on the boy’s case wrote that “his removal to the Philippines at this critical stage of his development and his removal from his familiar environment will likely cause irreversible damage and a severe behavioral response.”

A report from the Population and Immigration Authority said the boy “grew up in Israel

but was educated according to Filipino cultural values. He sees himself as belonging to a subgroup within the state. His mother educated him and strengthened his connection with his family members. The existence of an extended family in [the Philippines] should ease the arrival and absorption of the minor in the Philippines, to his benefit.”

The Tel Aviv Court of Appeals rejected the appeal, and Ms. Peretz and her son were returned to the Philippines. The deportation of OFWs from the Philippines and migrant workers from other countries, whether by agreement or force, has faced criticism due to the impact it can have on their children who are born in the country. Despite this fact, foreign guest workers who have dedicated decades of their lives to help Israeli families in their times of need are being deported in increasing numbers.

FILM FACTS ABOUT *TRANSIT* AND ITS DIRECTOR, HANNAH ESPIA

I saw this film in 2018 when *Transit* was screened as part of the film series “A New Golden Age: Contemporary Philippine Cinema” at the Museum of Modern Art. The controversial nature surrounding the story, the remarkable editing of the film, and the young director’s debut accomplishment as writer, director, and film editor made a lasting impression on me. The film was made in 2012 and released in 2013. Even though the film earned critical acclaim, numerous festival awards, and respectable ticket sales in Israel and the Philippines, *Transit* was not theatrically released in Europe or North America. The film was screened at numerous festivals in North America including the Palm Springs IFF, the Santa Barbara IFF, the Los Angeles Jewish FF, the Toronto Jewish FF, the Vancouver Jewish FF, and the Austin Film Society.

Fresh out of college at the University of the Philippines with a degree in film and audio-visual communication, Hannah Espia used her writing, directing, and editing talents to make her first feature film. Her father, who worked on the score of the film, offered some advice. “His advice to me was very realistic. My dad started in the music industry when he was only 18 years old, so he knows how hard it is to be young and starting in a highly competitive industry. He told me that people won’t always listen to me because I am young, and to always find a way for people to trust me and my work.” (Hannah Espia interview, 2013)

The inspiration for the film *Transit* was a chance encounter between the film’s writer and director, Hannah Espia, and an “Overseas Filipino Worker” (OFW) at Ben Gurion airport. The OFW was bringing home his three-month-old son as a result of the Deportation law of Israel in 2009.

“In my mid-twenties, I was working for my mom. She owns and runs a travel and tours company specializing in Holy Land tours. So, I was traveling back and forth to Israel for a while. During one of my visits, I met an OFW during an airport transit. He had his 3-month-old son with him. The baby was restless and crying the entire time and people were getting concerned. They asked the father why he didn’t wait for the baby to get older in order to travel, and he simply said that Israel does not want them to have families there. I was incredibly curious about this statement and went on to research and found out about the 2009 deportation law.” (“In Transit with Hannah Espia,”

Native Provence, June 10, 2018)

The film was shot in 14 days: nine days of principal photography in Israel, four pick-up shoot days in Manila and Batangas, Philippines, and one day at the Bangkok airport. In filmmaking, a pick-up is a small, relatively minor shoot filmed or recorded after principal photography to augment, correct or improve footage that has already been shot. Regardless of the extra four days, it is quite unusual for a film of this quality to be shot in nine days by a novice filmmaker.

The film was deliberately shot in three different languages. For authenticity, the director wanted the actors to feel free to switch in and out these languages as they pleased, except for the children, Joshua and Yael, who were required to speak only in Hebrew as would the real-life counterparts of the characters they were playing. Several of the Filipino actors who had not lived in Israel like the characters they portrayed required a Hebrew coach prior and during shooting. “Upon watching the film, Hebrew speakers in Israel mostly praised actress Irma Adlawan’s (Janet) pronunciation and delivery of the language. Marc Justine Alvarez (Joshua, the four-year-old) had a lot of mispronounced words, but since his character is young, they just thought it was cute and natural.” (Hannah Espia interview, 2013)

Writer, editor, and director of *Transit*, Hannah Espia has received significant recognition and critical acclaim for her directorial debut. *Transit* premiered on July 27, 2013, at the 2013 Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in Manila. The mission of this festival is to promote Filipino independent films and support new filmmakers. *Transit* won eight Cinemalaya Film Awards in the New Breed competition, including Best Film, Best Director, Best Cinematography, Best Editing, Best Original Music Score, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress, and the overall Audience Award.

On Sept. 18, 2013, the Film Academy of the Philippines named *Transit* as the official entry of the Philippines to the 86th Academy Awards (2014). It was neither shortlisted nor nominated for the Best Foreign Language film that year. The film did, however, go on to receive 12 nominations and nine awards at the 2014 Golden Screen Awards (The Philippine Academy Awards). All in all, the film garnered 23 major international awards and an additional 20 nominations.

Since then, Hannah Espia-Farbova married a fellow film director, editor and producer named Andrej Farba from Bratislava, Slovakia, in 2014; pursued graduate film studies in the United States at Ohio University in 2017; moved to Slovakia with her husband in 2019; produced and directed several short films in Slovakia; and is currently at work on the script for her second feature film. In a 2019 interview, Espia-Farbova summarized her future plans: “I’ve been working on my second feature film script, *Learning to Build a Fire*, for quite some time now and thinking of doing a major rewrite later this year. I’m also working on another feature film script which I plan to shoot in the U.S. I’m also working on a number of short films as a requirement for my MFA degree.” (Hannah Espia-Farbova interview, 2019)

In 2019 in a poll by Filipino film critics, Ms. Espia-Farbova’s film *Transit* was ranked 11th

out of 100 of the Top 100 Best Filipino Films directed by Women.

CONCLUSION

As I watched this film, I was aware of several things that I think you as a viewer should keep in mind. First, it is one of the few films about the Middle East and Israel that doesn't focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Secondly, the perspectives of the five main characters are distinguished through clever editing that replays previous scenes in slightly extended forms, offering new insights into each character's motivation and conflicts. Third, the film effectively captures both the community spirit of the Filipino community in Israel as they band together to preserve their life in Israel, as well as the antithesis of feeling against those who may have turned informant for their own benefit. And finally, the profound empathy shared by Israeli citizens as they watch their adopted Filipino "family members" deal with an unfair immigration policy.

If you have any questions or comments regarding the film *Transit*, please feel free to share them as directed. I hope you appreciate this film.