

# PRISONERS OF FATE

SORA FILM GMBH PRESENTS

A FILM BY MEHDI SAHEBI

EDITING AND SOUND MEHDI SAHEBI / SOUND DESIGN JULIAN FUCHS  
RE-RECORDING MIXER DANIEL HOBI / COLORIST PETER GUYER, DOC&POST

WRITTEN BY MEHDI SAHEBI, AYA DOMENIG

DIRECTED AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY MEHDI SAHEBI

PRODUCED BY AYA DOMENIG IN COPRODUCTION WITH SRF, 3SAT

[WWW.PRISONERS-OF-FATE.COM](http://WWW.PRISONERS-OF-FATE.COM)

# PRISONERS OF FATE

**A film by MEHDI SAHEBI**

Switzerland 2023, documentary, OV/Engl., DCP, 100 min.  
Languages: Farsi, German and Swiss-German

[www.prisoners-of-fate.com](http://www.prisoners-of-fate.com)

**Production:**

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## Synopsis

In PRISONERS OF FATE filmmaker Mehdi Sahebi accompanies several Afghan and Iranian refugees as they struggle to start a new life in Switzerland. The film tells of the protagonists' experiences fleeing their homeland and the significant challenges they face starting afresh in a foreign country. Not only the rigid asylum system, but also their personal traumas are obstacles they need to overcome. In times of despair, they see themselves as prisoners of fate, but friendship and humor help them keep their hopes alive.

[www.prisoners-of-fate.com](http://www.prisoners-of-fate.com)

## About the film

PRISONERS OF FATE accompanies a handful of Afghan and Iranian refugees over an extended period of time, all migrants who came to Switzerland during the influx of refugees in 2015.

In partly sad, partly humorous and at the same time tragic-grotesque scenes, the film sheds light on the new arrivals' everyday lives, their impression of their new surroundings and the painful process of coming to terms with their past.

In an initial period of loneliness and isolation, they see themselves as "prisoners of fate", feel helpless in the face of life's arbitrariness that seems will determine their path ahead. But they never fully abandon their hope for a life of dignity and time and again, they manage to overcome their crises and regain lightness.

The stories of Sanam, Mahmad and Omid illustrate the essential meaning life holds for all of us: that friendship, love and solidarity are the true cornerstones that sustain us through tough times and enable us to keep going, together.



## Biography of Mehdi Sahebi



Mehdi Sahebi was born in Iran and came to Switzerland at the age of twenty. He studied ethnology with a focus on visual anthropology, history and international law at the University of Zurich and received his PhD with his award-winning documentary film "Time of Closure" (2006). The film won the SRG SSR prize at the 2006 Locarno Int. Film Festival (Semaine de la Critique) and the jury and audience awards at the Entrevue Film Festival Belfort. In 2016, his latest feature documentary MIRR premiered at the Duisburger Filmwoche, where it won the support grant of the city of Duisburg as well as numerous other awards at international film festivals. Sahebi works as a director, cinematographer, editor and lecturer in documentary film.

## Filmography

2023 **PRISONERS OF FATE**, *script, director, camera, editor, documentary. (cinema), 100'*

World premiere:

- International Film Festival Locarno, Semaine de la Critique, 2023

2019 **PAUL NIZON: DER NAGEL IM KOPF** (*dir: C. Kühn*), *editor, doc. (cinema), 90'*

2017 **DAS ÄCHZEN DER ASCHE** (*dir: Clemens Klopfenstein*), *co-editor, fiction (cinema), 72'*

2016 **MIRR** (*The Field*), *script, director, camera, editor, documentary. (cinema), 90'*

See also: <http://www.mirr.ch/>

Awards and Nominations:

- Förderpreis der Stadt Duisburg 2016 (Duisburger Filmwoche 2016)
- Nomination Prix de Soleure 2017 (Solothurner Filmtage 2017)
- Special Mention (27. FILMKUNSTFEST Mecklenburg-Vorpommern)
- One-World-Film Price NRW (24. Fernsehworkshop Entwicklungspolitik, Frankfurt)
- Prize of the Town Innsbruck (International Film festival Innsbruck, International Documentary Competition)
- Best Feature Film, Best Documentary, Best Director, Best Music (Cinalfama Lisbon International Film Awards)
- Publikumspreis Dokumentarfilm (Provinziale, Filmfest Eberswalde)
- Prix Bartok und Prix monde en regards (Festival International Jean Rouch, Paris)

2010 **DIE RITUELLE REISE DER SCHAMANEN** (*dir: M. Oppitz*), *camera, 30'*

2007 **BESTATTUNGSKULTUR IM WANDEL**, *camera, co-director, doc. (TV), 30'*

2006 **ZEIT DES ABSCHIEDS**, *script, director, camera, editor, doc. (cinema), 63'*

Awards:

- Preis SRG SSR (Int. Filmfestival Locarno, Semaine de la Critique)
- Jurypreis und Publikumspreis (Entrevue Filmfestival Belfort)

2006 **DER EREMIT VOM MONTE VERITÀ** (*dir: C. Kühn*), *camera, doc., 52'*

2005 **HARU ICHIBAN** (*dir: Aya Domenig*), *assistant director, fiction, 22'*

2002 **UN ÉTRANGER ME REGARDE**, *director, camera, editor, doc, 52'*

2001 **HAMLET THIS IS YOUR FAMILY**, *Christoph Schlingensiefels Zürcher Hamlet-Inszenierung (dir: Peter Kern)*, *camera, co-editor, doc, 85'*

## Conversation with the director

**“Prisoners of Fate” accompanies a number of Afghan and Iranian refugees over the course of several years, from their arrival in Switzerland, showing both the daily hurdles they are up against, as well as the gaps in the Swiss asylum system. At what point does your documentary begin?**

The beginning of the film project goes back to Christoph Homberger’s initiative. A former star tenor, in the summer of 2015, during the first big influx of refugees to Europe, he founded a refugee choir in Zurich. His idea was to have Swiss citizens and refugees sing together and set an example for more respect and humanity in our society. In doing so, he built a bridge between supposed strangers and locals. The refugees were new to Switzerland and the choir offered them one of their first points of contact with locals. I accompanied Christoph Homberger and with a camera documented the refugee choir from the moment it was created to their final concerts.

During this time, I met many refugees from different countries, among them also numerous Persian speaking refugees from Afghanistan and Iran. I soon realised that I had a special access to the Afghan and Iranian refugees. Through my knowledge of their language and culture, as well as my own experience as a refugee from Iran in the 1980s, I was quickly able to connect with them at eye level.

**Is that also how you found the protagonists for your documentary?**

Yes, some of the protagonists I met in the choir. Others, I met when I visited the refugee accommodation in Zurich and Winterthur. These choir rehearsals were an important stage of my research, in which it slowly became clear who my possible protagonists were and in which direction the cinematic journey with them would take me. The real work though, was to give the main characters of the film a deep profile, to shed light on their background stories, to film touching and meaningful scenes from their everyday lives and to feel out their relationship to Switzerland and their own homeland. At the time, this part of the work still lay ahead of me. It was clear to me that my film project was only just beginning after the final concerts and that I wanted to continue to accompany my protagonists. From my own experience, I know that migrating to a new country means a radical break in a person’s life. You become anonymous, lonely and voiceless, especially in those first months and years upon arrival. It is also a phase in which people sink into themselves and have time to reflect on their past, their family and their own culture and personality. My goal was to portray this time period with all its aspects in the film.

**Through your own experiences, you managed to establish an intimate relationship with the protagonists.**

There were several factors that allowed me to establish a close relationship with the protagonists. To begin with, knowing their language and culture played an important part. It meant I could communicate with them on a deeper level and better understand them. Another decisive aspect was the time invested. I spent a lot of time with the protagonists, had intensive exchanges with them and developed a personal connection to each of them individually. The amount of time spent together was crucial for building trust and closeness. Another important factor was that I worked alone, without a large crew. That created an intimate atmosphere during filming and my protagonists felt more at ease when expressing themselves in front of the camera. Over the course of the first year of my work, they became increasingly familiar with me and the camera and eventually hardly noticed its presence.



### **What can you tell us about the protagonists' stories?**

In the film, on the one hand, we see Sanam and her family, whose 6-year old son was arrested at the Iranian-Turkish border when they came across. On the other hand, there is Mahmad, a soldier who deserted from the war, as well as his friends Ezat, Omid and Matin. What all my protagonists have in common is the challenge of dealing with their past and coming to terms with what they have experienced. In the film "Prisoners of Fate", I tried to portray my protagonists as individual people with their own feelings and thoughts. It was very important to me to include the perspectives of those affected and to tell stories from their realities. I therefore felt very strongly about giving the protagonists authentic voices and include all their facets. They are not heroes, but people on a quest, with ambivalent and contradictive thoughts and actions. Ultimately, like all people, they strive for a better and dignified life.

### **Did you want to bring this message to the public and thus inspire action?**

When I make a film, I never do so with a specific message in mind. I struggle with films that try to transmit an explicit message. Films should first and foremost show people's situation so that they can be interpreted in many ways, giving viewers the space for personal reflection and interpretation. Films can also make society reflect on certain issues and support the pursuit of humane solutions. But if I had to answer a question regarding the theme of the film, I would say it is a film about friendship and solidarity.

### **What changes occurred during the making of the film?**

Every film changes, as does its maker and protagonists. For me the creation of a film, isn't just a creative form of expression, but also a process of self-reflection and self-awareness.

As far as the refugee situation in Switzerland is concerned, it has changed a lot in recent years. The introduction of new asylum centres and accelerated asylum procedures have had a significant impact on the living conditions of those concerned.

There is also criticism from refugees, who describe the situation in the newly established asylum centres as catastrophic. The conditions as well as the treatment of the asylum seekers are perceived by some as inadequate and tough. It is important to take such reports seriously and to continuously improve the living situation of these people seeking protection. As a society, we need to keep readdressing the situation of refugees and asylum seekers and ensure that we provide humane conditions and also respect the rights of the weaker members of our society. Films can help raise awareness on such social issues and contribute to a better understanding and empathy. The cinematic representation of the fate of others and their challenges can help us confront other people's experiences, giving us an insight into a new world that may have seemed out of reach to us before.



## Cast

Mojtaba Seyedi (Mahmad)  
Ezat Alizadeh  
Omid Jafari  
Matin Saifi

Sanam Hosseini  
Teymour Hosseini  
Elmira Hosseini  
Abolfazl Hosseini

Nassime Sarvari  
Sohrab Niazi  
Khaled Safi  
Hamzad Zakavi

## Crew

Directed by: MEHDI SAHEBI  
Written by: MEHDI SAHEBI, AYA DOMENIG  
Produced by: AYA DOMENIG  
Production Consulting: FRANK MATTER  
Cinematography and Editing: MEHDI SAHEBI  
Dramaturgy: AYA DOMENIG  
Additional editing and  
Story Consulting: TANIA STÖCKLIN  
Sound Design: JULIAN FUCHS  
Foleys: LENA SCHMIDT  
Re-recording Mixer: DANIEL HOBI  
Sound Studio: ATELIER FÜR TON UND MUSIK  
Colorist: PETER GUYER  
Post-production Studio: RECYCLED TV  
Assistant Editor: MIRELLA NÜESCH  
Translations: MEHDI SAHEBI, KIMIYA DOMENIG  
Subtitles: BABELFISCH TRANSLATIONS, HEATHER KIMBER  
Title Design: MANUEL KREBS  
Produced by: SORA FILM GmbH  
In coproduction with: SRF, 3SAT  
Supported by: BUNDESAMT FÜR KULTUR (EDI) SCHWEIZ  
KULTURFONDS SUISSIMAGE  
ERNST GÖHNER STIFTUNG  
UBS KULTURSTIFTUNG  
JUBILÄUMSSTIFTUNG DER MOBILIAR GENOSSENSCHAFT  
VEREIN SPONTANKONZERTE  
FONDIA STIFTUNG  
INTERFILM SCHWEIZ: PROJEKTFONDS CÉLESTINE  
REFORMIERTE KIRCHE KANTON ZÜRICH  
REFORMIERTE KIRCHE BERN-JURA-SOLOTHURN  
SUCCÈS PASSAGE ANTENNE