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Assata Shakur: The Blackest Panther

Wanted by the FBI and the CIA. Escaped from a maximum security jail in New Jersey. Hunted by mercenaries and bounty hunters. Exiled and welcomed in Cuba like a heroine. Required from Fidel Castro by Pope John Paul II. This is the story of Assata Shakur, the Blackest Panther and America's Most Wanted Woman



Wanted

It is Wednesday, May 2, 1973. Three young black men travel in a white Pontiac from New Jersey to the southern United States. These are the hard times of Richard Nixon's "law and order," and the protocols of the FBI's counterintelligence program require the arrest of militants or suspects for minor offenses. Blacks, Latinos, Indigenous People, Pacifists, Socialists, Feminists. It doesn't matter: all are labeled - and treated - as criminals, terrorists and enemies of the state.

Official sources say the car had damaged taillights. Officers Werner Foerster and James Harper decide to arrest him, perhaps already informed of the presence in the vehicle of three clandestine militants of the radical black movement, or perhaps only because they "were driving in a state of blackness", according to the witty expression of Mumia Abu-Jamal. In the vehicle are Zayd Malik Shakur, Sundiata Acoli and Assata Shakur, former members of the Black Panther Party and at that time members of the Black Army of Liberation. Organizations syndicated as "black nationalist hate groups", a label that is applied indiscriminately to groups of various purposes such as the Muslim Nation, the Republic of New Afrika or the Coordinating Committee of Nonviolent Students.

Interstate Request for FBI Capture for "Murder"

The scene, from then on, is fast, confusing, tragic. The exact sequence of voices and movements is difficult to reconstruct, but what we know is that at the screams of the police Assata instinctively raises both of his hands in the air, when a gunshot shatters his collarbone. Only Zayd manages to defend himself and take one of the weapons that are in the back seat of the Pontiac. He falls dejected and with him also one of the police officers. Assata recalls: "There were lights and sirens. Zayd was dead. My mind knew that he was dead. The air was like cold glass. Huge bubbles would rise and burst. Each one seemed like an explosion in my chest. My mouth tasted like blood and dirt".

She is then dragged out of the vehicle. There appears to be no trace of Sundiata. "Maybe he managed to escape," he thinks, but Sundiata will be arrested shortly after. Meanwhile more policemen crowd around him to beat him up. One of them rests the barrel of a service weapon against his temple. They accuse her of having fired, but her fingers, free of gunpowder according to the neutron activation test carried out on the spot, leave no room for doubt. His hand hangs limp, almost dead. Assata didn't fire. He could not have fired with that strip of flaccid flesh hanging from his body and it knew how to be his right hand. Instead, he has received three shots: he has a wounded lung, a bullet lodged in his chest and an arm completely paralyzed. Bursts of pain and a new round of blows eventually fade her.

A hostile upbringing

Before choosing the name Assata Olugbala Shakur, her fighter name, she was christened JoAnne Deborah Byron. Last name that was changed during the wedding to that of her first husband Louis Chesimard, an activist from whom she would separate for demanding that she conform to the precepts of what a woman was supposed to be: the "holy trinity" of wife-mother-mistress of House. In time, Assata would consider their surnames as "her slave names." It was common in the 1960s and '70s for black activists to rename themselves with African and Arabic-inspired names, influenced by the revaluation of the true "old continent" produced by the powerful black Muslim movement and by the Black Power, although the imprint of African pride has been visible since the days of the Back to Africa movement and the Caribbean theories of blackness. Assata, like so many others, denied the surnames bequeathed to their ancestors by their slave owners, which in this case went back in history to the French colony of Martinique. Other ex-slaves, on the other hand, received or were awarded a generic name, the almost universal surname freeman - free man - with which their grandparents insisted on calling the beach where their family business was located in Wilmington. with which his grandparents insisted on calling the beach where their family business was located in Wilmington. with which his grandparents insisted on calling the beach where their family business was located in Wilmington.

Assata was born in Jamaica, but not on the Caribbean island, but in the Jamaica of the borough of Queens in New York. Curious place, and with strange neighbors. Just a year earlier, the grandson of a deserter and illegal migrant from Kallstadt, in present-day Germany, had been born there, a few blocks from his home. A certain Donald John Trump - or Trumpf, because such was the original family surname - who would ultimately be President of the United States. It is difficult to imagine more divergent trajectories than those of those two New York children.

Otherwise Assata had a childhood that we would call normal if racist societies and segregated education were normal from the time of Jim Crow laws. His childhood in the southern state of North Carolina was marked by a family upbringing that sought to instill in him a strong sense of personal dignity. This is how he remembers it in his autobiography: "My grandparents strictly forbade me to answer 'Yes, ma'am' and 'Yes, sir', or to look at my shoes and make servile gestures when talking to white people. "When you talk to them, look them in the eye," they would tell me. "And speak out loud to show you're not stupid."

But the education for the tough life that the Afro-American populations had to face was also mixed with strong doses of meritocracy, values typical of the black petty and upper bourgeoisie educated "a la Booker T. Washington", a kind of "Black Sarmiento. Her grandparents wanted their granddaughter to be a industrious person, to join the select group of what they called "the talented ten percent", to hang out "with decent children" and not to use the idiolects of popular and southern English. . Fortunately, Assata soon found the most rebellious link in his family genealogy: his uncle "Wild Willie", a black sambo and Cherokee Indian, a sort of legend that in the first decades of the century denounced the exploitation of "people of color" and defied the norms of segregated society.

At school in the South, everything was second-hand: education, teachers' salaries and even books, which arrived used and broken after being discarded in schools for white children. But even more complex than institutionalized racism, was self-inflicted racism by an education that encouraged self-denigrating practices that indicated that black was dirty, ugly, bad and stupid. Paradoxically, Assata would recall equivalent troubles in the paternalistic education of the "integrated schools" of New York where, being the only black girl in the class, she was seen and treated as a kind of talking chimpanzee who was lavished condescending "smiles for little black guys".

A political re-education

Years later, the re-education process in the black movement would lead him to retrace all the state mythologies of American history, from the War of Independence to the Civil War, from the Conquest of America to the Vietnam War, in a country that has spent 223 of its 244 years of existence in war. A stinging Assata would conclude, for example, that the process by which the Thirteen Colonies gained their independence from the British was a "misnamed revolution" and that it was "led by a few wealthy white kids who got tired of paying high taxes on money. king".

Also his childhood idols were demolished one by one, from the patriarch Abraham Lincoln, a supporter of the mass deportation of blacks to Liberia, Haiti or any other destination in Africa or the Caribbean, to Elvis Presley, who referred to the only thing What blacks could do for him was buy his records and shine his shoes, and that in 1970 he volunteered as a snitch for the FBI.

Between the venality of black careerists and the banality of the restricted and racialized American Way of Life, young Assata will grope for a path. An important milestone will be his meeting with African students at the university, which will reveal to him a world beyond the stereotypes in vogue: that of the communists who in the comic strips all dressed alike and invariably worked in the salt mines, the the Calibanesque Africans who ate human flesh and wore loincloths, or the democratizing gospel that the US Marines - black and white - were supposed to be taking to Vietnam. It was about brushing against the grain an education full of stereotypes and fantasies about the Third World in a country that, like no other, profoundly ignores the world it dominates. Assata will conclude in that period as a student: "Everything is a lie in Amerika [sic] and what keeps it going is that too many people believe it."

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