

# Heart of Gold

BY JOHN DYSON

**Loving hands reach out of the nightmare of Mid-East politics to repair the hearts of dying children**

**Wafaa Huseini gave birth** to a baby daughter, perfectly formed and exquisite with high cheeks and dark eyes. Noor was her eighth child and the miracle of what she had created made Wafaa glow with pride and joy.

But the happiness turned quickly to alarm. This baby seemed to be struggling for existence. Listless and feverish, she was often pale and fighting for breath. Wafaa took her to a clinic where an ultrasound scan of the baby's heart revealed a dismaying problem. A hole in the wall between the heart's two lower chambers allowed Noor's blood to take a short-cut instead of transporting oxygen around her body. The hole in the heart could be repaired by complex and costly surgery but Wafaa was in despair. She and her husband Samih, an auto-electrician, had the ill-luck to live at perhaps the worst address on the planet: Gaza.

On this tiny strip of land jammed between Israel and the sea, 1.4 million Palestinians were struggling tensely for existence. Hamas, a violently militant group, had



**Volunteer workers of SACH together with Noor and her mother: Aide Tali Zanaba, Dr. Alona Raucher, Dr. Sion Hour, Arsen Arutiunian and Natalie Katirel.**

PHOTOGRAPHED BY SHEILA SHELHAVET



seized power and fired missiles into Israel while Israel responded by blocking supplies of food, water, fuel and medical supplies.

At first, doctors advised waiting because holes sometimes close by themselves. Noor was just over a year old when, unbelievably, a second disaster struck. Wafaa noticed the baby's left eye growing bigger and shinier. It was cancer. Noor's eye was removed following a course of chemotherapy but the treatment affected her blood vessels, cutting flow even more. By the age of three it was clear that Noor's heart would not cope for much longer. Without open-heart surgery the little girl was doomed. But in all of Gaza there was not one heart surgeon.

One small and distant hope remained. A group of volunteer cardiologists and heart surgeons called Save a Child's Heart (SACH), operate on dozens of Palestinian and Arab children every year. But they were based in Tel Aviv and with Israel

and Hamas at each other's throats, the problems of getting Noor to Israel seemed insurmountable. But Wafaa didn't hesitate: nothing was more important than her little one's life. Her doctor contacted SACH and soon, to Wafaa's joyous disbelief, Noor was accepted as a patient.

As Wafaa prepared for the trip, a third disaster struck. The door to Israel had slammed shut. Provoked by repeated shelling and rocket-fire from



### *Jews, Christians and Muslims work together as a team in the operating room*

Gaza, Israelis invaded with devastating force. Bombs, shells and missiles rained on Gaza's crowded streets. As Wafaa and Samih hunted for meagre sup-

plies of beans, butter and hummus to feed their family, Noor's condition worsened by the day. With neither electricity nor gas, Wafaa cooked over a wood-fire in the street outside their third-floor apartment. She prayed the fighting would end in time to save Noor. On 25th January it did. Before leaving Gaza's rubble-strewn streets Wafaa hunted the shops for the one thing Noor had set her heart on. With the surprise gift tucked in her bag

along with the precious permits to travel, Wafaa carried Noor through the checkpoint into Israel.

**In a darkened room** at the Wolfson Hospital in Tel Aviv, SACH's nine heart specialists and nurses are gathered for their weekly review of upcoming cases. An ultrasound scan of Noor's labouring heart is projected on a screen. 'This little one is very sick,' reports cardiologist Akiva Tamir. Flares of red and blue colours in the picture indicate the heart's chaotic blood flow. Surgeon Lior Sasson weighs up the complications. 'I can fix her but we'll have to work fast,' he declares.

A few corridors away, Wafaa and Noor share a room in the paediatric

ward with other Arab mothers and sick children from Gaza, Iraq and the West Bank. In Muslim fashion they wear long black gowns with colourful head shawls. In another room are children SACH has flown in from Zanzibar and Kenya. All mix together and exchange smiles with Israeli patients and parents.

Cuddly in hospital pyjamas, pink ribbons bunching her pretty brown hair, Noor is shy and nervous. To comfort her, Wafaa pulls out her gift package. Beaming, Noor rips it open. Inside is a pair of dancing shoes, covered with gold sequins that sparkle in the light. Ecstatic, Noor puts them on and refuses to take them off, even in bed.

**Early on Monday morning,** Noor's bed is empty and the golden shoes are put into Wafaa's shoulder-bag. The little girl is on a gurney being wheeled into the operating theatre. Wafaa watches stoically as the doors swing shut behind her daughter. She turns away with a prayer on her lips.

In a few moments Noor's single eye is closed and she is deeply asleep. A mask connected to breathing tubes covers her face. Sensors attached to



each big toe are plugged into monitors displaying heart-rate, temperature and other statistics of life. Her bare chest is painted with yellow iodine then draped with sterile green cloths, leaving only a small square above her heart.

Surgeon Lior Sasson, 53, is helped into a sterile blue gown and tied behind. A big man with strong-looking arms, grey hair curling out from the elastic of his surgical cap, he did his surgical training in Chicago and served five years as captain of an Israeli Navy patrol boat. Among the 11-person me-

dical team are Jews, Christians and Muslims. Sasson adjusts the magnifying eyepieces attached to a headpiece along with a powerful spotlight and a small camera feeding pictures to a large screen at the end of the room. Sasson's favourite disc of 'chanson' music plays softly in the background. The team have listened to it for years and sing along softly.

Every operation costs about \$10,000 (about half of the actual cost) so the SACH team raises \$2.5 million a year from philanthropists and foundations

in Israel, the EU and the US. Noor's operation is being paid by Texas-based Christian's United for Israel and Shevet Achim, a Jerusalem-based Christian organisation that brings Arab children like Noor through the checkpoints and border posts to SACH.

The rewards of what they do are enthralling. Children from all over the world arrive at the hospital like the walking dead, and leave three or four weeks later happy and strong, the big ones carrying their own suitcases. 'When you put a smile on a mother's

face it's really something,' says Sasson. 'And if it makes a step towards world peace, that's good too.'

**In the operating room,** Sasson extends a hand and a nurse hands him an electric scalpel. There is a sudden, sharp smell of burning flesh air as Sasson slices into the skin of Noor's chest, the red-hot blade, cauterizing blood vessels as it cuts. Then a shrill buzz fills the room as Noor's sternum is split by a surgical jigsaw. Shiny steel clamps pull the two sides of the rib cage apart. And

## SACH: Fired only by the love for a child



**The late US surgeon Dr Amram Cohen** (above) founded Save a Child's Heart (SACH) in 1995 at the Wolfson Medical Center in Tel Aviv. Since then, SACH has treated more than 2000 children suffering from congenital and rheumatic heart disease from more than 30 countries (see map). Congenital heart disease is the most

common congenital cause of mortality in the first year of life. In developing countries, 8 children in 1000 are born with the condition. Fired by nothing more than love for a child, the team from SACH has saved more than 2,000 children in 13 years. Half the patients are Arabs from the West Bank, Gaza and Iraq - all states deeming Israel to be an enemy - and half from 30 other countries, mostly in Africa. Children are brought to Israel in groups of 4-6, accompanied by a nurse or a family member if they are under 3 years old. The average stay at SACH's special children's home is three months.

The paediatric cardiac medical team at the Wolfson Medical Center is on call 24 hours a day. All approximately 70 members volunteer a substantial part of their time to the SACH program and do not receive any remuneration for their services. SACH trains medical personnel in all areas of paediatric cardiac care. 50 physicians and nurses from all over the world have been trained at the Wolfson Medical Center since 1995. SACH's medical teams travel to countries where cardiac care is limited to teach and perform life-saving heart surgery. To date, 14 teaching missions have taken place in Ethiopia, China, Mauritania, Moldavia and Ukraine, and have resulted in the treatment of more than 130 chil-

dren and the onsite training of hundreds of medical personnel worldwide. Currently there are more than 1,000 children on the waiting list for heart treatment. SACH is motivated by the age-old Jewish tradition of

Tikkun Olam - or 'repairing the world'. In contemporary Jewish teachings, particularly in the US, it has come to describe acts of social kindness by individuals who want to repair society and make the world a better place.



1. Haiti, 2. St. Vincent, 3. Trinidad, 4. Ecuador, 5. Mauritania, 6. Senegal, 7. Ghana, 8. Ivory Coast, 9. Sierra Leone, 10. Nigeria, 11. Uganda, 12. Congo, 13. Angola, 14. Zimbabwe, 15. Zanzibar, 16. Tanzania, 17. Rwanda, 18. Kenya, 19. Ethiopia, 20. Somalia, 21. Eritrea, 22. Sri Lanka, 23. Vietnam, 24. China, 25. Russia, 26. Kazakhstan, 27. Palestinian Territories, 28. Jordan, 29. Iraq, 30. Moldova, 31. Romania, 32. Ukraine





there, glistening like a bright pink gearbox in a puddle of clear engine oil beats Noor's swollen heart. The left ventricle is massive and pink, the right atrium withered and dark purple.

A spurt of blood sprays Sasson's blue gown as he cuts into the frail aorta to connect it to the heart-lung machine. Another pipe is plugged into the pulmonary artery. At a nod from the surgeon, the machine's rotating pumps slowly suck the blood out of Noor's heart and take over its role. On monitors, the moving graph showing the heart's activity becomes a flat line.

When the empty heart is motionless Sasson cuts deep inside it and inserts curved needles attached to weighted threads that hold the sides apart. The cavity resembles the open beak of a hungry baby bird in its nest. Probing deep into its 'throat' he finds the hole. It's huge, about one-fifth the size of the heart. Using tweezers as a pen and dipping the tips into blood for ink, Sasson draws a 1.25cm circle on a

*'Very nice job - lovely!' reports the doctor after the operation*

patch of sterile white Gore-Tex then cuts it out. This outdoor-clothing fabric is used because the body does not react to it. Making delicate, microscopic stitches with tiny needles and hair-thin thread, he sews the patch into the hole and then closes the heart.

'Ready?' Sasson calls.

Everyone holds their breath. Sasson calls for the defibrillator and places its two 'paddles' on either side of the heart. Jabbing a button with his thumb,

he shoots a jolt of electricity through the heart muscles. Intently watching the monitor screen, Sasson smiles as he sees the pattern of a normal heart rhythm.

With an echo-transponder threaded down Noor's throat into her lung, another doctor performs a close-up scan. The pictures on the screen show no leakage of blood. 'Very nice job - lovely!' she reports. A few months from now, the Gore-Tex patch will be covered by Noor's own tissue and should function normally all her life.

**Only two days later,** Noor is sitting up in bed in the intensive care unit. Shyly smiling, she reaches into Wafaa's bag, takes out her golden shoes and Wafaa puts them on her feet. Before long, the little girl will be going to a hospital in Haifa for an artificial eye to be inserted into the empty socket. Noor will be beautiful again.

*Note: this spring another dream came true for Noor: she went to the hospital and got an artificial eye.*