

Assata Shakur – A Biography

Assata Shakur is a black activist and political refugee. She was born on 16 July 1947 (Vgl. Laika Verlag In: laika-verlag.de) in New York in the borough of Queens. Due to the early divorce of her parents when she was three years old, she was raised mainly by strangers and eventually by her aunt who also helped her graduate from high school (Vgl. : Revolutionäre Frauen – Biographien und Stencils In. Assata, S. 84).

While attending the City College of New York and the Borough of Manhattan Community College in 1967 (Vgl.: Revolutionäre Frauen – Biographien und Stencils S. 84), she protested against the inadequate curriculum for black students and was arrested, for the first time, for trespassing (Cf. p. 85). During these years, she was first exposed to Black Nationalist organisations, which would influence her initial activist drive. Shakur attended several meetings of the Golden Drums, where she also met her ex-husband Louis Chesimard.

In 1970, many disagreements lead to a divorce, whereupon she changes her native, self-defined "slave name" JoAnne Byron to Assata Shakur and joins the Black Panther Party; the Black Liberation Army and the Republic of New Africa (cf. Rohlf Sabine: Das Leben der Assata Shakur, Missy Magazine). She is also involved in several campaigns to distribute free breakfast to children from poor backgrounds and focuses on teaching Black History to Black people who have grown up with the white version of historiography.

Several years before joining the Black Liberation Army, Assata Shakur was involved in bank robberies alongside other members of the Black Panthers. The Black Liberation Army group, which she joined later, engaged in armed conflicts against the US State by robbing banks and killing police officers and drug dealers. In 1971, she becomes the target of a nationwide manhunt. When she is finally caught in 1972, she is not charged with any crime (cf. p. 85).

In May of 1973, Assata along with Zayd Shakur and Sundiata Acoli, are pulled over by a police officer on the New Jersey Turnpike for a broken tail light (Cf. p. 85). Zayd is asked to get out of the car and a gun battle ensues, killing both the policeman and Zayd. Shakur is shot in the chest with her arms raised and spends the next four years in custody. She is charged with attempted murder, bank robberies, hostage-taking and eight other crimes related to the Turnpike shooting for the period between 1973 and 1977(cf. p. 85).

Assata is sentenced to life imprisonment for murder and assault in the final trial. At the sentencing, she stated that she was ashamed to have even participated in the trial because the jury had been racist and sexist.

Shakur later gave birth to her daughter in the prison psychiatric ward of Elmhurst General Hospital in Queens (cf. S. 86), one of the many prisons she served time in. Immediately after the birth, her newborn was taken away and once again, the justice system overrode her. Over the next six years, such deplorable prison conditions followed that even the UN Human Rights Commission declared her treatments unworthy.

In 1979, four members of the Black Liberation Army entered the prison and managed to free Assata Shakur at gunpoint (Vgl. S. 86). They did this by taking prison guards hostage and escaping with Assata in a prison van. The escape lasted several years. The FBI circulated wanted posters throughout the New York/New Jersey area - meanwhile some supporters asked her for asylum, which was reflected in "Assata Shakur is welcome here" posters. In 1984, she fled to Cuba and was granted political asylum under Che Guevara (cf. S. 86).

In 2005, the FBI classified Assata as a "domestic terrorist", which also made her the first woman on the list of most-wanted terrorists. They also offered a bounty of two million US dollars for her cooperation, which led to her having to go into hiding again after living in relative freedom for almost 20 years (cf. Laika Verlag: Assata. Eine Autobiographie).

In 1999, Assata Shakur gave an interview on NBC in which she retold the story from her side and spoke out publicly about it. She is nevertheless accused of killing the policeman and continues to insist that she would have been shot several times with her arms raised (cf. YouTube: Black Rights Fugitive JoAnne Chesimard In Cuba - Part 1 | NBC News).

Nowadays, her whereabouts are still unknown, making her struggle more and more evident. She represents a symbol for all the still incarcerated, innocent Black people who were arrested in the late 70s and shows them in a way that it is worth fighting on and not letting themselves be subjugated. Assata Shakur is one reason why we need to continue the fight against police brutality and why we should consider restructuring the institution of prison. It is also important to raise awareness about the physical and psychological violence in prisons.

Bibliography:

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