

Palestine

The following is a memoir based upon notes and e-mails of some days spent in Palestine during two visits in October 2002 and 2003 which lasted together about six weeks working with the International Solidarity Movement followed by one brief visit in 2005.

As the plane glides down to Ben Gurion airport in the early hours, my befuddled mind keeps returning to a the final scenes of an odd German film, *Deutschland im Herbst*, made at the end of the 1970's immediately after the killing of the banker, Schleyer, and the mysterious deaths in Stammheim prison of Baader, Enslinn and Raaspe, the jailed members of the Red Army Fraction. The film was made by a collective of radical directors and its final scenes are direct footage of the funeral of the RAF prisoners, a funeral delayed by disputes as to where they could be laid to rest. The final shot is of a young woman, dressed in denims and wheeling a child in a buggy. She is alone and walking away from the chaotic scenes round the interment. Around her shoulders she has draped a red *kefiyah*, the Arab shawl cum headdress, adopted as the symbol of Palestinian defiance. I realise that the Palestinians and their defiance have been around a long time now, half my life, as a periphery. I remember arguing about the Six Day War in 1967 with a Jewish colleague in my laboratory as we played bridge at lunch-time for a penny a point. Then I remember being taken round an exhibition of wrecked Israeli tanks and aircraft outside Cairo in the immediate aftermath of the Yom Kippur War in 1974 which so nearly brought Israel down. And all through that decade and into the next, the hijackings and killings; the three airliners spectacularly blown up in the desert, Leila Khaled, the Lod massacre by Japanese sympathisers, Munich, Mogadishu and Entebbe; the civil war when King Hussein expelled the PLO from Jordan; the collapse of Lebanon, the Israeli invasion; Sharon presiding over the massacres at Shatila and Sabra and, regretfully, refraining from killing Arafat as he left for exile in Tunis; the Lebanon hostages and the shadowy rise of Islamic extremism in the shape of Hezbollah and others; pieces of Israeli teenagers scattered around a Tel Aviv disco. All the time ripples spreading out from the cancerous centre of Palestine and Israel, now stretching out to Afghanistan and even by indirect routes to the destruction of the World Trade Centre and wherever that will lead us. The impulse that put me on this plane is something that I do not fully understand. Seeing a leaflet in the local Coop appealing for volunteers and thinking what reason do I have not to? Is it that simple? But flying in to Ben Gurion, I know that I am going, finally, to buy a *kefiyah* for my son.

Jerusalem

The hotel which I have booked seems deserted apart from a solitary UN woman. It is high up on the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem, the Palestinian side, where the airport *servis* taxi will not venture even though it meanders through endless back streets to deliver passengers to houses in West Jerusalem, the Israeli side of the city. Outside are two burnt-out buses belonging to the Mount of Olives Bus Company. The hotel owner is converting the roof terrace to a news studio for a Turkish television company which will be able to send out its live news with a stunning backdrop of the gilded Dome of the Rock. In the morning, walking down the Mount of Olives towards the walls of the old city, it is possible to pass in succession, the Church of the Resurrection, on the site where Jesus is said to have done just that; the Church of

something or other where Jesus stopped to debate with Jewish scholars and which is now adorned, rather beautifully, with the Lord's Prayer in a multitude of languages, living and dead; the Jewish cemetery where Robert Maxwell is buried and which, because it is the place where the final resurrection will take place, is now the most expensive burial place in the world; and then the chapel Dominus Flevet on the traditional site where Jesus wept when he saw Jerusalem:

As he drew near and came in sight of the city he shed tears over it and said, "If you in your turn had only understood this day the message of peace. But, alas, it is hidden from your eyes. Yes, a time is coming when your enemies will raise fortifications all round you, when they will encircle you and hem you in on every side; they will dash you and your children inside your walls to the ground; they will leave not one stone standing upon another within you — and all because you did not recognise your opportunity when God offered it."¹

At the very bottom of the hill is the site of Mary's tomb, a dark pit run by the Greek Orthodox church, so smelling of incense that it is liable to be banned under the Chemical Warfare Convention, and the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was taken. In the Garden there are some aged olive trees just about alive propped up on crutches but still giving fruit. Our self-appointed guide says that these olives are picked and the oil is used to fill rosary beads sold on special terms by the Vatican.

Climbing up the road that runs under the city wall, the numbers of police grow until to enter the city gate by the Temple Mount, one must pass through a barrier across the road then through another blockade at the actual gate. It is Friday prayers at the Al Aqsa mosque and the riot police are preparing for another demonstration. Up the hill and at the start of the route of the Via Dolorosa, the crowds disappear. Tourist Jerusalem — the Christian sites within the wall — is almost empty, the only hazard a succession of shop-owners importuning you to just go into their shop, just to see, no obligation to buy. Opposite the second station of the cross, where Veronica is said to have offered Jesus a scarf to wipe his brow, there is a shop which sells delicate Armenian jewellery, silver with blue stones. I promise to buy some when I return to Jerusalem but I never do not at least on this visit.

The Via Dolorosa at one point crosses Arab Jerusalem and the crowds return. We have tea in a half-full cafe which is far from rapturous in its welcome. It is just down from the house which, in his desire to spark off a response, Ariel Sharon, before he became Prime Minister, bought insisting on the right of Jews to buy property in the Arab quarter. The house arches over the street and has a giant seven-armed Jewish candlestick on its roof and a huge Israeli flag hanging down its front, spattered with red paint which looks like blood, something which probably satisfies all parties. Two soldiers patrol its roof.

Along the route of the cross through a deserted covered bazaar to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with its mess of competing Christian sects owning different corners and at its centre the tiny bedecked chapel, held together with steel girders, which contains the holiest place of all, the tomb itself with a tiny rock shelf which might just have held a wrapped body. Normally crowded like a rush-hour tube-train, in these

¹ Luke 19, 41-44

tourist-fled days it is possible to stand here for a while by myself waiting for sign, a revelation.

The Jerusalem Museum is housed in a much restored Crusader castle on the walls. Ingeniously arranged to cope with flows of people, some looking at the views over the city, other wanting to see the exhibits, it too is almost empty, the shop and café closed. The first exhibit room is devoted to the early years up to the Roman invasion. In the centre is a large map entitled 'From Egypt to the Euphrates' which shows the kingdom of David stretching from Gaza and Sinai in the south through the lands of Judea and Israel, the biblically conquered territories such as Gideon and Milom and then, marked out by purple lines which have no obvious end, an ill-defined 'Area of Influence' which does indeed stretch to the Euphrates. In succeeding rooms, subsequent eras, Byzantine, Arab, Ottoman, finally British, are covered. They suggest that, with the exception of a brief Crusader interlude, Jerusalem functioned as an obscure backwater of various empires until 1948 when the subsequent unending war for its possession began.

Training

In the morning we go to the Damascus Gate, the centre for all the *servis* taxis leaving for the West Bank, to meet the rest of the group, many of whom have passed the night in a hostel facing the gate. We leave in two minibuses and, *en route* for Bethlehem, are passed by what, in retrospect, was the most shameful thing I will see, three huge twelve-wheeled trucks fronted by a UN-flagged Landcruiser, all from the World Food Programme, trundling their way out of Israel into the West Bank. I last saw these white trucks heading south from Harar in southern Ethiopia for the refugee camps on the Somali border. The WFP deals with the bottom of the heap, the famine situations which are now happening a few miles from central Tel Aviv. The journey to Bethlehem can be walked in two to three hours according to the guide book. Changing taxis and waiting at checkpoints takes almost as long to reach Beit Sahour on its outskirts and the Three Kings Hotel which is deserted apart from ourselves.

The hotel is a transit point, a kind of base camp for training and allocation to groups. There are thirty-three of us, spread over most ages and many nationalities. The Irish and the Swedes are probably there in disproportionate numbers, the US Americans are entirely from the east or west coasts. Southern Europeans, French and Italians mostly, it seems form into their own teams. At one point, a solitary Buddhist monk appears then vanishes. It is explained that the group takes decisions on a consensus basis even in the most unlikely circumstances and we are instructed in some of the formalities of this process. This seems most familiar to the youngest who have been through various anti-globalisation gatherings and particularly to the Americans. The old-left Europeans like myself are rather baffled by it being more used, I suppose, to tidy divisions between leaders and led. We have run-throughs of the political and cultural background, of which words to use and which not; Israelis and Palestinians never Jews or Arabs, army not IDF, martyrs is preferred to suicide bombers. There are lessons in non-violence. Is a boy throwing a stone at a tank a violent act? Can words be violent? Finally there is a session role-playing. Settlers confronting observers protecting Palestinians; reactions to abuse. This is done by grey-haired woman whose Christianity is proclaimed on her T-shirt and who has lived in Hebron for seven years since a small and fanatic Israeli group decided to move into the centre of the town. She was, perhaps still is, a theatre director by trade.

The centres offered are Nablus, Tulkarem City, villages around Tulkarem, and Safiq. Ten here, ten there, splitting us down into small working groups of five, the smallest number for effective protection and coordination. A group of shaven-headed young men have set themselves on going to Nablus because, I am sure, they think that is where the action is. They want to smell the teargas. In the end, I end up in a group of fifteen headed for Tulkarem and the villages around it. Uneasily and rather shamefacedly aware that I have never heard of this town, I snatch a quick look at a map. It is up in the north hard up against the border with Israel. Before we leave, we negotiate the purchase of mobile phones from two Palestinians who appear with a box of assorted equipment. I buy a conservative Nokia with a subdued purple face running on CellCom, the network which is said to have the best coverage where we are going.

The mobile phone has a special place in life on the West Bank and for our own work in particular. In a place where all travel depends upon knowing which roads are open, which closed and which dangerous as well as knowing what curfews operate where and with what degree of vigilance, instant communication becomes almost essential. Women walk out to the fields carrying mobiles, every meeting is constantly in movement as people get up to receive calls in a corridor. The settlers also have their own needs for communication and so, in a rare example of shared convenience, the coverage of all three networks is almost total. Contract purchase, at least for the Palestinians, is virtually unknown so the purchase of top-up cards becomes a regular chore. For us, the mobile becomes almost a 'weapon' with the army or settlers, walking towards them with a mobile prominently displayed, sometimes talking into an apparently open line. The edge we have is that our unseen but implicit passports make it uncertain who is on the end of the line; the embassy, some branch of the media, a central office with contacts, mum or dad or Aunt Jane, in any event, someone who might, plausibly, make trouble. We have a list of numbers saved; mine starts '*ambulance*', '*army1*', '*army2*' and ends '*UKconsul*'. This last is something of a gesture. The Swedish, Canadian and French consuls are said to be good, the British useless and the US liable to pass your details on to Shin Bet, the Israeli secret police. As time goes on the list gets longer; 'Chris', 'Heidi', 'George', 'Raquid', 'Ella'... as our groups expand and contract.

Contacts

Finally, we get into two yellow taxis, one minibus, one the ubiquitous Mercedes 300D which can carry nine people and is seemingly indestructible. No journey on the West Bank is simple. The territory is, roughly, divided into three. There are the cities such as Ramallah or Nablus, nominally under the administrative control of the Palestinian Authority, now in ruins and patrolled more or less constantly by the army. Each formal entrance to such a city is marked by an army checkpoint which people are required to walk across unless they have a vehicle with some special papers. There are also informal exits, tracks across which both people and vehicles permeate in a constantly changing pattern. Inside the city, movement is controlled by the army with curfews and random checks. Outside the cities, two road systems exist almost independently. There are the settler roads, good tarmac, sometimes dual-carriageway, with a yellow line along each side. Only vehicles with yellow, that is Israeli, plates are allowed on these though green-plated, that is PA-licensed, taxis sometimes dodge along them under threat of a largish fine if stopped. Access to the settler roads is highly limited as most access points from villages have been physically blocked. Sometimes they pass through or close to Palestinian towns and these may act as

interchange points with the second system, the largely unmetalled tracks which now function as the Palestinian communication network. Only green-plates use these, mostly the yellow taxis which act as general purpose transport. Other traffic is almost non-existent.

A trip from, say, Ramallah to Kufr Qadum, the village where we are first based, and a distance of about 40 miles, therefore requires several cars and some walking. The first leg is to take a *servis* to Qalandia, the army check point to the south of the town. All direct routes to the north are now closed. The walk across the checkpoint will now take somewhere between thirty minutes and two hours or more depending upon the numbers waiting and the rigour of checking. Then one takes a yellow-plated car, either a *servis* to Qalqiya if there is one waiting or a special if one has booked in advance, which will go to Funduq, a small town on the settler road. This takes about an hour. There one waits for a green-plated *servis* to go the final few kilometres along a dirt track winding around the hills until finally one climbs up towards the two minarets of the village. This will take about thirty minutes. There is an alternative to the final stage. Carry on from Funduq for a few minutes then turn left along another settler road. This will bring you to a crude road barrier, just a pole swung across the road with a shack beside it. This is a settler security gate. Probably the guard will refuse to let the taxi through but he may let you pass. Walk down the road about four hundred metres to another settler barrier, pass that and walk round the earth mounds which block the road. It is then ten minutes walk down this road to the village. It is this route which has been closed off to the Palestinian villagers and was the road along which we came.

The taxi stops, waits whilst we get out then speeds off. I pick up my suitcase and walk towards the barrier. The barrier is open and as I walk past it a settler appears, shouts at me then raises his gun and fires three shots, presumably aimed over my head. I stop and put down my case which is seized by the settler and thrown over the side of the road. Several other settlers come down the road, mostly armed, and begin to harangue our group. Two, a man and a woman, stand very close to me, screaming and gesticulating. The woman, almost incoherent with rage, shouts "*I hate your civil rights. Go back to hell or England*". I know this because one of our group is recording it all whilst another has it on video. I have taken up, quite unconsciously, a classic Prince of Wales pose, hands behind the back, feet apart, leaning slightly forward from the waist and occasionally trying to make a point about legal rights. It seems that this drives my interlocutors completely barmy for the few minutes which elapse before the army pitches up. The first to appear, bizarrely, claims to be an army journalist and is taping the proceedings. At one point, a settler starts to photograph us so I ask if I can snapped with the journalist who seems quite happy for this to happen. Subsequently, I think that he must have been Army intelligence of some kind and that our arrival at this point was known in advance. Then a more serious army squad comes along and separates the two groups. One, quite politely, retrieves my case, others, less politely but not violently, move us back behind the barrier after asking to see our documents. We are then left in a group with two of us negotiating with the army. The police then arrive.

The legal position, insofar as anything is legal in an illegally occupied territory, is that the army cannot arrest anyone unless they are military police. Arrests are done by the regular police force which exists in far fewer numbers. The one Palestinian with us, unwisely leaves our group to help with negotiations and is seized by the police who want to take him away. As he is pulled inside the police Landrover, one of us climbs

in the van as well, other walk around in front of it. The army squad moves in then amid general chaos and assurances by the police that they will bring him back in five minutes. The van with our Palestinian comrade drives away. We are moved back outside the barrier. Suddenly the army leaves as well and we are left with the settlers.

There are now about ten of them around the barrier. One is a young, chubby gingerish man with a green skull-cap who keeps shuffling closer and closer to our group, now seated on the ground in a consensual circle, to listen to our discussion. We invite him to join us and he moves away, scowling. I later think that he is probably from Shin Bet as after I see him in another settlement keeping watch on us. A little way off there is a thin man in an electric wheelchair who just stares at us from behind dark-glasses. The original guard, who we learn is called Danny, a buffoonish figure in long baggy shorts and a baseball cap, walks up and down, occasionally making forays towards us, his M16 across his chest. One patriarchal figure with a bushy white beard, who had harangued me now sits with one of our group, an Irish trade-unionist with an almost caricature Irish gift of blarney. They are in deep conversation. Later this man brings teas and honey cakes out to Ray at the gate, only to be then involved in a blazing row with his two teenage sons for the act. Another burly watchful man stands at the gate talking into a mobile. He claims to be a major in the army and the head of settler security, producing a document in Hebrew to justify their rights to blockade the road. I negotiate with him in a desultory kind of way about the situation and about Danny and his casual ways with guns. Other settlers just stand around.

After about an hour with no sign of our friend returning, we decide that two of us should go to the police station to find him, that three should stay at the barrier to in case the police should bring him back and that the rest should go to the village. The single taxi which can be reached will only pick us up about a kilometre back down the road and can only take five so one group walks off. An hour later we follow leaving three behind. It is growing dark and to hide our nervousness we tell jokes. I can only remember one my son has told me about a Barnsley goalkeeper which does not translate well. Finally, the taxi comes and thirty minutes later we arrive in Kufr Qadum. We have lost our only Palestinian member, the one who has arranged local contact, and there is a general sense of confusion. They fix us some food and take us to our accommodation. A family has moved out the ground floor of their house into the upper floor leaving us two rooms and a bathroom. After a couple of hours, the police-station pair phone us to say that they at the police station and the three at the barrier return. They are quite safe but very nervous as for the last part of their vigil in the dark, a van had been parked a few metres away with its back door open revealing a settler with a tripod-mounted machine gun. We have a long meeting, partly with the farmer who we are to accompany in the morning. He explains that the previous week, a group of woman picking in the place we are to go had been beaten up, their olives sacks slashed and scattered and their dishes broken. He himself has had rocks thrown down to drive him away. He leaves a map of his fields and, finally, we go to bed on mattresses at about midnight. We meet up with our lost Palestinian the next afternoon. He had been detained overnight, beaten up then dumped on a settler road without his papers. Luckily the police overlooked his mobile deep in a trouser pocket and he could be picked up. There were no charges though some settlers had come in claiming he had various assaulted them.

Picking olives

We get up at 5:30, make some tea and walk up the road leading out of the village to meet the farmer. Looking rather forlorn, he explains that, despite his promises of the night before, he can find no one willing to go to this particular place to pick. After some time, a few young men are gathered and we move off. Later, I can recognise the four young men with us as being political activists in the village though with what allegiance I have no idea. One, who has a clerical job with the UN in Nablus and is our main interpreter, wears a blue jerkin with UN emblazoned on it, almost certainly against UN rules. Everyone calls him Kofi Annan. We walk along the holed but metalled road that was once the way out of the village and, curving over the hill and down we can see the outskirts of the settlement, Qedumin, running along the ridge opposite. The road continues to the right up to the ridge but is blocked about two hundred metres along with earth mounds just before a barrier identical to the one at which we stopped the day before. There is an armed guard there. Through this gate it is only a few hundred metres to the olive grove but we cut left along a track running under the line of settlement houses. We clamber up a trackless hillside, just rocks and scrub, round a hillside and arrive at a wide, steeply rising valley shaped like a horse-shoe. Buildings line the top of the valley curving round to embrace the terraces below all of which are planted with olive trees. A double line of settler houses along a tarmac road runs across the mouth of the valley which is effectively closed off for about three-quarters of its perimeter. We climb up to the top terrace, a place about two hundred metres long and fifty or so wide, which lies just below the road running all round the ridge in front of the buildings. The very tops of the tallest trees are just about at road level. We dump our bags in a heap and set about learning how to pick olives.



Settlements in the West Bank are scattered throughout the territory. All are illegal under international law. They cover about 41% of the land if one includes all that which is claimed as part of the self-styled 'municipal authority' of each place, areas much greater than the actual built-up parts. No one seems to know just how many there are for they come a number of different varieties but there are certainly dozens with in excess of two hundred thousand residents. They all begin with a few caravans or construction cabins usually placed on hilltops or some strategic location. We can see one still in this stage on a hilltop across the valley with a yellow bulldozer

working below it. This bulldozer becomes part of our daily life setting off in the morning from Qedumim, down the hill, across the flat valley then up a dirt road towards the new settlement. It is, we learn, busy blocking off roads and grubbing out a new one presumably as preparation for more construction around the few cabins on the far hilltop. The cabins with which Qedumim began are still visible as we walk round it, forming a small circle around the highest hilltop. From there, the settlement has grown in roughly concentric rings down the hill until, meeting other lower ridges, the pattern becomes more complex. However, the overall scheme of expansion becomes clear as we move to other places. A road is laid along the contour then houses are built along the road with fencing all around the new development. Entry is controlled through a sliding green metal gate with a guardhouse. The houses face inward, they back on to a high fence or a steep slope and there is always a fenced perimeter or boundary road lit by orange sodium street lights. The house style is always the same; white walls, red-tiled pitched roofs. The street lamps are pale blue, the same colour as the decorative fencing along the roadsides. It is in effect, southern California come to Palestine. Air-conditioning, car-ports, patios with plastic children's swings. New rings of houses are added in stages along the contour, always ringed by a road or fence.

Qedumim is an eastern extension of a line of such places, collectively called the Shomeron settlements, which run roughly west to east from the Israeli border just south of the Palestinian town of Qalqilya along the Nablus road breaking into two arms north and south around Nablus. Two of the largest, Ariel and Emmanuel, are on the southern branch; Qedumim, guarded by what we are told is the largest army base in northern Palestine lies on the northern. Some of the Shomeron towns (for this is just what they are) have started to grow together, moving down from their hilltops, and now share a common perimeter fence and are linked inside the fence by a road. The population of each seems to be from about four thousand upwards and growing.

It may be that this cluster of new towns, each apparently almost physically identical as though cloned by an Israeli Barratt Housing, may have some individual character one from the other. Qedumim, for example, seems to have some large educational establishments and seems for religious Israelis whilst Ginot Shomeron seems a lot more commercial. At the point where the access road from this last meets the main road, there is a huge advertisement hoarding. It shows a curved shopping mall with a row of glass-fronted shops including the English names of Levi, Barbie and Calvin Klein. The space in front of the shops has a crowd of strolling pedestrians whilst in the bottom foreground there is a line of smart cars. Walking out towards you between these cars are a pair of school-girls dressed in skirts above the knee. All the woman pedestrians are similarly showing a degree of leg. This is not a religiously-orthodox shopping mall, the poster reads, this is modern, fashionable and, above all, safe, a place where school-children walk around unguarded and where there are no guns. The top half of the poster is taken up with the surrounding country side, rolling brown hills see from an elevation. The land is apparently bare of inhabitants, the sprawling, dull-white Palestinian villages which can be seen from all points are absent. Except that by carefully looking, it is possible to see their ghostly shapes, almost but not quite removed by the photo-lab, on some of the hillsides. The top of the back wall of the mall is curiously crenellated and matches the top of the wall of a huge building which acts as the perimeter of this part of Ginot Shomeron, an actual shopping mall which, I learn was opened by Ariel Sharon himself and which, a few days on, I will watch as we pick in another olive grove. Across the poster is a large telephone number and a

Hebrew message which I leave untranslated but which almost certainly reads something like 'Phone for further details'.

It is oddly reassuring, as I patrol up and down along the access road under the poster, to realise that this town at least is no more a statement of religious principle than a Barratt estate in Surrey. About eight o'clock, a stream of large, modern cars swing down the access road and turn left, driven mainly by a single man or woman. In twenty-five minutes they will be in Tel Aviv suburbs, in forty minutes at Ben Gurion, airport. I doubt that any of these people would beat up a Palestinian woman. They may not even own a gun. They probably know that in their town are people who would and do but, I guess, their main concerns are, first, that cheap labour to clear the garbage has dried up (though the contracted Thais and Philipinos do make a difference now) and, second, the impact that bombs have on property prices.

The hard-core crazies mostly live in what are termed outposts, that is places deemed even by the Sharon government as illegal. On my last day, we work in a place with one of these high up on a facing hill, a huge outline Star of David prominent in front of the cabins. It was built there as is the custom after an Israeli settler was killed nearby. This man, so the Palestinians tell us, believing in the destiny of Jews to inhabit this land used to roam the countryside with his M16, shooting and beating as he saw fit, until one day some Palestinians killed him. Even higher than this outpost is a huge three-storey villa cum blockhouse. We are told that another, rather similar, man lives there, the self-styled 'King of Shomeron' with, allegedly, thirteen families to protect him on his forays. The Palestinians are nervous of this place, working at a furious pace to strip the trees.

Learning to pick olives is no great matter. Tarpaulins of various kinds are spread under the tree then by picking, or stripping with plastic rakes or even by thwacking the trees with long sticks the olives come down, first sounding like shower of rain, later just pattering on to the sheets. It is the kind of low-level, continuous activity, which along with the moving and carrying gradually wears the muscles down until after ten hours, one is tired to the bone. We work with Palestinians leaving two or three lookouts to cover all approaches, each with the inevitable mobile phone. On the first day, nothing at all comes near though occasionally a white car stops for a while on the perimeter road before moving slowly off. In the afternoon, two woman come up to the terrace below to pick their trees. The following day, they are joined by some of their family and on the final day they come children and all. Three women in our group go down to them and are adopted. The villages are very conservative and there a stricter separation of sexes; men never sit down to eat with women. The women pickers have organised a good supply of food and on the third day, keeping watch above their terrace, they send me up a plate of warm chicken and almonds with rice. They pick until it is dusk, stripping part of one final tree almost in the dark. They are not finished but they will not return without us.

Almost nothing happens in the days as we move from place to place, village to village. The early start, stripping trees, keeping watch. On the second day, the army pitch up, check our papers, leave. Settler security passes by, probably from one of the private security firms which now run the formal security inside the towns. One day, two APC's stop on the road and a dozen soldiers tip out. They mill around and almost form up looking at us, then they suddenly get back into the vehicles and drive off. Later that day three cowboys come by; stetsons, pistols, machetes, riding brown horses. They come into the entrance to the field and one, who knows one of the

pickers, gallops off around the trees. One dismounts and stands by his horse. He has a beer gut straining at his belt which carries a pistol. He looks round expressionlessly, I stand a couple of metres away in front of some filled olive-sacks, mobile phone in my hand, staring at him. The third man, whose has wild black hair and M16 stays mounted. After about five minutes they leave. They are 'bad men' one of the Palestinians tells me. Another day, a boy, maybe fifteen comes in. He has a dog on a lead which tries to attack anything that goes near. Settler security comes by and chases him away; even the security man seems a little shaken by the dog's viciousness, "Danger dog", he mutters. On the Saturday sabbath, some teenage Israeli girls stand above us and chant "Kill the Arabs". Sometimes cars stop and settlers stare at us, talking into mobile phones. The day after a bomb explodes near Haifa, the local army decide to stop all olive-picking for a day without apparently any general authority. Near us they use rifle-butts to clear fields but in our area they approach and negotiate a compromise that we should pick unseen from the road. Later they move us back further back. One or two Palestinian families give up for the day. One man points to his children, mimes shooting a gun and shrugs his shoulders. We try to help a farmer gain access to a grove now completely surrounded by a settler fence as the town expands. He is fobbed off with excuses, then told he has to pay thirty shekels an hour fee to pay for a security man to guard him whilst he and his son pick.

Along one of the roads we are patrolling, heavy construction equipment is sinking huge concrete pipes vertically at regular intervals to act as cesspits. Next year a row of houses will be placed along here, another swathe of olives will be cut down, another fence put up. On the opposite hill, the red-tiled houses are built in regular rows and will be separated by about three hundred metres from this new row.

This uneasy calm produces an almost surreal feeling in our group. We have a competition for the best strategies to see off hostile settlers. The acclaimed winner is the photo-album ploy. In this, faced with a group of hostile settlers or soldiers, we all bring out large photo-albums and advance in a line saying "This is a nice one of mum on holiday last year". Good Jewish boys all, they know the sacred taboo of the family photos and, unable to bear an hour of muttering "Yes, I can see the likeness" before turning the last page and beating us up, they would flee in terror.

At one moment, dragging tarpaulins up a steep bank under a tree very close to a road which the Palestinians are loath to pick, I realise that my head is just above curb level close by a bus-stop and I have almost overwhelming urge to climb on to the road and wait for the red 831 bus to come and get on, asking for a single to Tel Aviv. This is the bus which at one point in our first confrontation with the settlers slowly went along the road and stopped to pick up non-existent passengers for in practice the buses travel almost empty. Walking slowly about on lookout, it is possible to face out over the hills and imagine that one is watching for the dust of the Apaches as they ride down from the hills. Except that turning round there is a small piece of suburban southern California from where the bad men with guns are going to come. In some places, the disorientation is heightened by the chimes of the school marking off periods. These use apparently random and unfinished snatches of popular melodies like *Frère Jacques* or *Ten Green Bottles*, mad Mr Whippy ice-cream van chimes booming out over deserted roads. One of the group remarks that it like a Stephen King book; a piece of suburbia dropped by aliens on to a bare hillside and totally deserted.

About half our original group split off on our second day to go to Tulkarem where they are needed in the refugee camp and to take turns at night standing by to

accompany ambulances with urgent cases to the big hospital in Nablus. These are often held up for long periods, ostensibly to check for weapons or bombs, and the presence of an 'international' is said to speed them up. They never reach this town, however, stopping at a village called Jayyous where trouble has erupted over the destruction of olive groves along the line of the new 'Sharon wall', a huge construction of multiple fences and ditches which is designed to separate Israel from the West Bank (though in practice it cuts off large chunks of Palestinian land as well). Our group helps blockade the bulldozers and succeeds in stopping the work. On the following Sunday, a further big demonstration is planned, a day when the Palestinians in our area decide to stay away from the olive fields. There has been a big settler meeting the previous day to discuss the action of the army in actually attempting to remove a nearby outpost and it is feared that they will be out looking for trouble.

Jayyous villagers mobilise in force and the army step in to clear the disputed area with teargas, stun grenades and warning shots. It is for a while chaos with Palestinians rushing about attempting to remain in possession of their olive trees and the remorseless push of the army to clear them off. Some are captured, bound and blindfolded; some of our group take off the bonds, others take photographs and generally impede the soldiers. One is taken away to be released after a few hours. Another trips whilst scrambling over a stone wall and cuts open his head. Ten stitches and some bandages later he is able to tell his story to the Irish press with, possibly, a little embellishment as to the bullets whipping through the branches causing him to lose his footing. This plus a reporter from US public radio ensures some media coverage apart from the local TV and Al Jazeera. Media exposure of anything like this is judged to be crucial. Thirty-five years ago, the Yippies chanted '*The whole world is watching*' as Mayor Daley's police tear-gassed them outside the Chicago Hilton and they knew that they had won some kind of victory because of the unusual presence of TV cameras set up to record the arrival of politicians. Now the whole world can be watching wherever the action is taking place; the problem is how to attract the attention of the scattered media people. The demolition of Arafat's compound was worth several TV crews but the steady demolition of a people's livelihood requires something extra. There is an unspoken but quite obvious rule at work here. International blood will get the international media; arrest an international and it will make at least a regional paper. They know that as well as we know it and it offers just a moment of space to exploit. The group stays on in Jayyous while more resistance is planned but in the end it comes to little. The army declares the area a 'closed military zone' and clamps a 24-curfew on the village. The olives are gone within a week and the fence goes up.

Is there any sign by the army or the settlers they can see what they are doing, that the basic seed of the violence is the oppression of the Palestinians, their daily and remorseless humiliation? One settler stops his car and gives me a bottle of cold water and some plastic cups; a soldier warns us about bombs in the olive trees and another wishes me a good day when he gives back my passport crossing back into Israel. The army journalist on our first day wishes me good luck. Some cars just slow down. They know why we are here and maybe there is a slight sense of shame that middle-aged Englishmen should be motivated to travel here to protect poor men and women from harvesting that which is theirs. The politics of Israel are complex. There is an article in *Ha'aretz*, a Jerusalem daily, which asserts that a "proto-fascist group" has

penetrated the highest levels of government and there are Israeli peace groups who come into the West Bank.

This small envelope of security within which we work is, I am sure, responsible for the relatively untroubled hours we spend picking olives. In the evening we hear some stories about what happened a few kilometres away, requests come to help from other villages, a man walks back from the fields and tells me that his brother is being prevented from harvesting his olives by settlers but that he will not ask for our help for fear of later reprisal. In the absence of any immediate pressing desire to grab land, such as seems to be happening outside Nablus where the population of a whole village called Yannoun has been scared away, we are watched, probably photographed but nothing is done in front of us.

It is for the Palestinians a clear victory. Every day we stay in villages, the smiles and greetings grow. Farmers say 'Thank you' as we pass by and the number of invitations to eat or drink coffee in their house grows. In part, there is a clear economic reason for this. The villages are destitute. Olive growing is the only discernable economic activity, feeding the presses in each village. Young men hang around all day dressed in clothes so dirty that they have to be all they possess. A few dozen more bags picked from places otherwise abandoned means a few more shekels income in places from which money has almost disappeared. I would guess that another reason is pride. The pervasive scent throughout is an uneasy fear as the army vehicles drive through the villages, as the random road-blocks are set up, as the settlers block off another access road. There is simply no law here for Palestinians. They are beaten up, shot, confined to their houses and abused without the slightest legal redress. Their water supply is reduced at will; their electricity is on for only half the day whilst the night sky is turned urban-orange by the massed lights from the settler towns and roads. I guess, I hope, that when they walk with us up to a settler barrier and simply pass through or when we argue with the army or when we simply stand there staring down the settlers who stop their cars, a small amount of self-respect is regained. They see that there are people out there who care, that the world is not entirely ignorant. I doubt that it amounts to much. Certainly it will not stop the exodus of the educated young or those with family connections. The large empty houses which we are given to stay in are empty because relatively well-off Palestinians, some of whom came back from abroad after the Oslo Agreement, have left. Almost every conversation with the young men who travel with us veers at some point to the help we can give them to get visas. "*Can you find me a Canadian girl to marry*" one young man asks and we all laugh though it is not entirely a joke. The vista shown on the advertisement is a long way off but it is not a macabre dream. The basic point is that the Israelis want these people out and, as the economy collapses and malnutrition increases, the only real barrier to this is the difficulty in finding a country which will take them.

I leave the olive trees in a yellow-plated minibus which picks me up from the roadside. Fifty dollars takes me over the border and in forty minutes I am at Ben Gurion. At the border, the soldier waves us over and takes a long look at the aubergine EU passport. Just for a second or two we stare at each other then he waves us through. At the check-in, I am asked far fewer questions about where I have been and done than we had been warned to expect though I get a special body-check. After looking through my suitcase, the young man doing the searching, carefully repacks the case and takes me to the head of the check-in queue, waits whilst the Lufthansa steward gives a boarding-pass and places on my suitcase, as well as the normal destination label, another label, bright yellow and marked only HOT. He then escorts

me politely to the final passport control, takes me to the head of the queue and wishes me a pleasant flight. What all this is about I have no idea. Has all this been one long game, watched, monitored and now completed? On board the flight I get up and stand in the aisle looking down the plane. I feel, I suddenly realise, like I did decades ago after leaving one of the big multi-day CND marches; as though I have left behind a family which I will never see again, people for whom for a time I felt something close to love. Standing there my eyes fill with tears and I cry for a moment, silently, tears running down for a loss and for a pain that that there is no way to heal.

As I finish writing this, I have in front of me some pieces of paper decorated with little stickers from sweet wrappers. They are from some children to whom I had given pens and paper as a present. One says “*Mike, thank you for the pen...He’s very nice. Remember my Mike Remember. Please.*”

In the year in which I first visited Palestine, the Israeli government began to build what they termed a separation fence and which the Palestinians call an apartheid wall. It runs north-south roughly along the ‘Green Line’, the de facto border between Palestine and Israel though often cutting in to take large swathes of Palestinian land. One village, Jayyous, has been largely cut off from most of its agricultural land. When the construction of the wall near Jayyous first began, it had been protested by a large number of villagers plus internationals and Israelis and ever since there had been an international presence there. By October, 2003, the wall had been completed. It has a few gates in it for use by farmers and the irregular opening of these had been a constant source of friction between Palestinians and the Israeli army. The villagers decided to hold a mass protest at one of the gates and asked for internationals to be present. Times had got tougher for ISM in Palestine. Two volunteers in Gaza had been killed while the offices in Beit Sahour had been raided. It had become more difficult to get past immigration. I went to Jayyous a few days into my second visit.

Jayyous

The day starts at 6.30 when we gather at the village mosque to walk down to the gate. We are in the village of Jayyous which lies right on the separation fence which is being built mostly on Palestinian land to divide Israel from the occupied territories. Jayyous has most of its land on the other side of the wall and has to get access to it by two gates which are opened irregularly if at all by the soldiers. Today the farmers are holding a demonstration against this supported by internationals and with some media presence. The ISM has about 20 internationals gathered in, less than hoped as some are still in the Maqata compound in Ramallah acting as a presence against the threat of an attempt to kill or expel Arafat. There are another 15 or so from other groups and some Israelis have promised to pitch up from Jerusalem.

The previous evening we had discussed 3 scenarios. A: being blocked at the main north gate when we would sit down in protest. B: being blocked at the gate of a settlement which has Palestinian olives trees actually inside it and which has stopped families entering. C: all gates open in which case we help pick olives. Tactics have been planned in detail: who is willing to be arrested (this is mainly judged on intentions for staying in Palestine for long or short times); groups formed; roles allocated, legal, media, medical. I am grade one expendable, arrestable, short term, no skills, no video camera.

The wall is about 15 minutes away and the farmers are gathering there. The wall is a strange structure. A huge gouged dike-like snake with stone blocks on the Palestinian side about two metres high. On top there is a dirt road, a fence and on the Israeli side a metalled road. Razor wire is coiled all along the sides of each road. It is impressive and violent as it cuts through olive groves as far as one can see. Yet the fence itself is really rather disappointing, little more than something which might surround a playground with some barbed wire on top. Its supports are already rusting away and some of it has already been bent back by the farmers.

It turns out that the gate is in any case not locked and unguarded but before we can work this out a jeep comes up and two soldiers secure it with a padlock. They then go saying the gate will be closed all day. It seems as if the Israelis are being intelligent; leaving us in the sun and ignoring us. The internationals sit down as if protesting, the farmers mill around talking. After about fifteen minutes one gets a piece of angle iron and breaks the padlock fastening with one heave. The gates are opened and the farmers rush through; carts, pickups and one large water tanker disappear into the olive groves followed by the internationals. On the Israeli side nothing stirs. Some of us follow the farmers into the trees, the rest walk off down the track which leads to the settlement to meet the farmers who want to go inside, principally a family called Noful. Four are left at the gate to watch more farmers through. Part way down the track more are asked to help farmers in the olives so when we arrive at the settlement we have about twenty internationals but no farmers. Phone calls from the gate assure us that at least one of the Noful family is near us but he cannot be found. So we wait. Then phone calls tell us that two army jeeps have pitched up at the gate and they want some more support so five go back. It turns out that they have closed the gate and that most of the Nofuls have not passed through in time. One however is still on the loose, and after some phoning, it turns out that he is at another settlement gate. So it is decided that five internationals should go with him and the rest return to the gate. It is believed that other farmers are gathering at the south gate which has been permanently closed whilst villagers from another place want to be escorted through. Just then a rather smart bus rolls up with some young Israelis who have driven up to give us support and want to know what they should do. Access from Israel by Israelis is, of course, virtually unrestricted.

We are now at scenario M. FUBAR. Fucked up beyond all recognition.

At the gate there are one jeep, one humvee and one police jeep and about 6 soldiers and police. The gate is closed but actually unlocked as the sturdy padlock still hangs from the broken and rather puny catch. It is also clear on closer inspection that the various sensors and cameras attached to the gate are all inactive with wires that lead no where. We open the gate and take photos. After about ten minutes one young Palestinian comes down from the village wheeling a bicycle. He seems to want to take water to his family but the soldiers refuse to let him pass. We argue with them about the absurdity of their actions given that dozens of Palestinians have been let through unchecked and that we are wandering back and forth. They refuse and after a while decide that they want us too on the Palestinian side of the fence. There is a little pushing but mostly we just argue about the pointlessness of their orders. Eventually they move us though and swing the symbolic unlockable gate closed. The internationals decide to go back to the village to regroup and to decide what to do next. The young Palestinian asks for some support at the gate so three of us stay behind.

So now we have five internationals and one farmer outside the settlement, about a dozen internationals and uncounted farmers in the olive groves, another dozen internationals in the village, unknown numbers of farmers at the south gate and us three plus one Palestinian with bicycle at the north gate. It is about eleven and very hot. There is no shade. I talk with the Palestinian who explains that he was late as he had been at school. He is in the business stream there and wants to get through to go to his greenhouse on the other side of the wall. The water is for this. He wants to study business so that he can expand the marketing of the produce. We talk a bit about a time when there will be no wall. It will seem then that all this was a dream I say to him.

Then Huwaida, our graceful Palestinian coordinator who walks though soldiers as if they do not exist, appears on the other side of the fence. She has been asked to meet with some Palestinians further down to talk with them about returning. Then off she goes, ignoring the jeeps and into the trees. After a while another jeep drives down and, after consultation, a soldier calls me over to the fence. This is now a closed military zone he declares and if you do not leave you will be arrested. He produces a scruffy photo-copied map and a paper with some Hebrew typing to prove this. We will arrest you in sixty seconds if you do not move, he says.

And so they do. The gate is swung open and the soldiers come through take away cameras and handcuff us behind our backs with plastic binding. We are marched back to the Israeli side where we wander about ignoring commands to move here or stay there. The soldiers stand around uncertainly while I harangue then about the manifest idiocy of arresting three harmless internationals at an unlocked gate whilst dozens more pick olives. What is the point of all this I keep saying. What are you achieving by this? Why are your padlocks so crappy? Finally, the senior officer, shaven headed, sunglasses, folds up his map which for unknown reasons he had been consulting, and barks out orders. He ignore our requests for explanations, he is action man and we are put into jeeps and off we go. I shout out to the young Palestinian now waiting with his bicycle some way off. Salaam aleikum. Peace be with you. It will be alright.

My jeep has one soldier who has obviously taken against me and one who is rather curious and wants to know why we are here "in this mess". I give him the standard and truthful reply of having been asked by the farmers to help them pick their olives. He seem genuinely baffled by this. The lip-curling soldier refuses to answer when I point out to him that the gate is now both unlocked and unguarded. We drive for about thirty minutes and I slip my wrists out of the binding. We are taken out at a border crossing between Israel and Palestine on the Israeli side and wait around for perhaps an hour. Officer shaven-head consults a map. He ignores me when I ask if he is lost. Israeli civilians waiting at a bus stop stare curiously at us. My phone rings out *Ode to Joy*, my chosen ring tone, and I answer it, thus revealing my lack of binding but almost make it before my phone is taken away and new handcuffs, proper ones, are used. The other two chat to the soldiers, each in their own way.

Eventually it is explained to us that we have been bad people but that we are not being charged. Instead our names and passport numbers have been taken and if we are found again in the West Bank we will be deported. And this is recorded in a notebook which one of the policemen produces. Our bags are returned and all our belongings are there. Our passports are returned and our handcuffs removed. It takes a while to find the key to mine. And then we walk off to the bus-stop fifty metres up the road to get the next bus to somewhere as we have no idea where we are and are certainly not

going to ask the soldiers. Later we drink a beer in the small town on the bus route. Our cameras are all in order but every one of my sound recordings has been carefully erased. My companions want to head back to their village in the West Bank that night but I need to work things out. My bag is in a village called Sonniyra, where I had been picking olives, and my bedroll is in Jayyous but I have money and credit cards so I will stay the night in Jerusalem and work out a route back in the morning. And so we get a bus to Jerusalem and they get a taxi to the Qalandia checkpoint while I check in at the wonderful Jerusalem Hotel in east Jerusalem.

Later in the evening I learn that back in Jayyous, they have been using teargas to disperse the crowd at the gate, soldiers pushing up the hill towards the village, possibly declaring a curfew. It is not clear if all the internationals are back or whether some are trapped in the olive groves with the farmers. No one has any idea what will happen next.

And so it goes. Arafat is still alive. Some olives have been picked. Almost unnoticed a group of Palestinian farmers have shown defiance and have asserted the right to pick their olives peacefully. Where it will take them is uncertain. Probably down a road of curfew, lock-down and gates permanently shut. ISM is committed to keeping some international presence with them but they will have to live with their decisions not us. And a young Palestinian's vegetables will probably wither through lack of water. It is not all large-scale violence just endless, pointless small-scale repression which leads to continuous pressure and humiliation until something cracks.

Having been returned involuntarily to Jerusalem, it seems unwise to return to the place where I was arrested so the plan is to move on from the zone around the wall and to go to a village called Yannoun which has been harassed by settlers. First I must get my luggage so the plan is to travel to Sonniyra where I left the bag and then on to Yannoun, a trip which normally would take 3-4 hours in a car. So this is how it goes.

Journey to Yannoun

I go by taxi out to Qalandia, the checkpoint outside Ramallah which is the main centre for servis taxis going north. I want to go first to a small town called Funduq and I wander around for a while before finding that nothing is going anywhere in that direction. Part of the problem is that, unknown to me, Funduq is also the Arabic word for hotel which causes some confusion but mostly the difficulty is that a big bomb has gone off in Haifa so the Israelis have 'locked down' the West Bank in reprisal. I finally take a taxi to another checkpoint a few kilometres away but this has been totally closed. A friendly Palestinian takes me back about 50 metres and we clamber over a bank and across a stony field with the soldiers at the closed checkpoint visible about 100 metres away still busy stopping anyone from passing. Back on the road we walk up to the checkpoint from the other side and get in a servis going to Hawarra, the checkpoint outside Nablus. This takes the Ramallah by-pass, a good hard-top for about 10 minutes before being stopped by a temporary road-block. It then turns east for some time until after dropping down it turns north again. There are date-palms and bananas in the fields and I guess that we have arrived at the Jordan valley. After some time we turn west and climb up until stopped at a road block. The taxi is turned back and the passengers walk through.

I am in the middle of a large expanse of nothing much at all; one lorry parked by the road with a couple of Palestinians standing in its shade. The other passengers get into a car going to Jenin. On the MP3 player I have Jimmy Cliff, *I Can See Clearly Now*.

Time passes and eventually a *servis* _ a big Mercedes _ comes by with just space for one more in the back row, three adults and two children. It is going to Tulkarem. They have all come from Jordan over the Allenby Bridge. We bump along back roads, sometimes just dirt-tracks for a couple of hours until the *servis* somehow sidles into Tulkarem by the back entrance through an orchard after the news has come through on the radio that there has been a bomb at Tiber close to the city. The *servis* driver takes me to a taxi station where a driver promises to take me out to the city checkpoint from where I can get a taxi to Funduq, a town which still seems the best bet as a jumping off point for Sonniyra. When I get there, the taxi disappears and I am left at a cross-roads with army vehicles everywhere and not a taxi in sight. I phone the ISM coordinator in Tulkarem who tells me that the army has made an incursion into the camp and the city and that a curfew has been declared. I will have to walk back into town.

Walking back, I seem to have taken a wrong turn as I find myself on a military road fenced on either side and not passing through the rubbish tip which I seem to remember from the trip. I walk on. Bruce Springsteen *'Born in the USA'*. Nirvana *Jesus Doesn't want Me for a Sunbeam*. I am uncertain as to whether this is a good or bad omen. The sun is going down by now and an army jeep stops and wants to know what I am doing, something which seems a touch obvious but I try to be polite. The driver asks me why I want to be shot and drives off. Joan Baez, *Ashes and Diamonds*, Creedance Clearwater *Pale Moon Rising*. I feel decidedly uneasy as the fencing seems to stretch forever. Another army jeep stops and the driver asks for my passport then tells me to get in the back. He drives into a kind of contractors yard and questions me. I tell him that I am working on an EU project studying the potential for solar energy in Palestinian villages, the same tale that took our ISM group through the checkpoints a week before only then I was supposed to be leading a study tour. The soldier is rather interested in this and asks whether we have much sun in England. I reply that we have a lot of potential for wind power but he loses interest and tells me to get out, returning my passport. It will turn out that despite its rather threadbare character, not one soldier at a dozen checkpoints will ever show disbelief at this tale of solar energy. I walk through another checkpoint and get a taxi to the ISM flat in the city centre where there are five other volunteers who had been at Jayyous. They tell me that there is now a total lockdown on the West Bank as we go out for a meal. No one seems to take any notice of the curfew despite the fact that APC's have only just pulled out. We have a big meal in the camp after visiting its football team in training.

In the morning, I go out with the ISM team to the outskirts before leaving them to walk down a hill, climb over a dirt roadblock and turn left along a fine, deserted highway, the main road to the big settlements at Ariel and Qedumim. I walk for an hour, miss the correct turnoff and walk back for a half hour. Eels *Goddam Right It's a Beautiful Day*, Rolling Stones *You Can't Always Get What You Want* (but if you try you'll get what you need). I climb over another dirt block on to a Palestinian road where there is a taxi. Just as I am phoning the ISM group to say that I'm OK an army jeep stops on the other side of the block and two soldiers get out and wave their guns at the taxi telling it to move off. I hop in still talking and we bump off. For a rather large sum, he agrees to take me straight to Sonniyra. I arrive and meet up with my luggage. However it is impossible to get a taxi out so I stay with my original team for the night.

In the morning I get a taxi out and after about ten kilometres see a large green signpost _ Jerusalem is just 67 kilometres away down the settler road. I am supposed

to be going to Hawarra but before this we encounter another checkpoint which stops the taxi and all Palestinians from crossing. I am allowed through; solar energy forever. On the other side I find a taxi willing to take me to Acraba which is near to Yannoun and, after a little negotiation, onward to Yannoun itself. We climb up a long valley to a cluster of small houses at his head. Outside one of the houses there is an international wearing a jerkin of the Ecumenical Accompaniers who do just what it says on the label. The trip has taken three days, nearly twelve hours travelling time, 11 taxis and cost almost 250 shekels - about \$50.

Mostly things in the West Bank are not dramatic. Just trips which should take three hours taking three days and I am the lucky one with my pocket full of shekels and my aubergine passport. The slow and deliberate strangulation of an economy. The security element is a joke. With a little planning one could take a lorry load of guns from one end of the West Bank to the other and over into Israel. And amongst the Palestinians, who with infinite kindness help me from taxi to taxi and through and round checkpoints, there are probably some who thoughts turn to such things as they wait in the sun for hours until child-soldiers decide to open up.

Yannoun

Yannoun is a small village at the top of a remote valley. It is really two villages on different levels about a kilometre apart with some 90 people living in the two. It is the most beautiful place which I have seen in Palestine only marred by the watch towers, cabins and sheds, all linked by a power line, which lie on the skyline of the horseshoe of hills which surround the village. These are the edges of the notorious settlement, Itamar.

Itamar was founded in 1997 and claims to be one of the largest settlements in the West Bank. In fact it seems to be no more than a small central cluster of houses with chains of watch-towers and cabins stretching off along the hill-tops enclosing a large amount of empty land. They are unusual in that they run sheep and raise chickens as well as having some organic farms. They base their claim to the land on an obscure part of the prophets which say that some neighbouring mountains were given to Joseph by God. I really can't explain this properly. Go their excellent web-site for the details. This says

There are springs and wells in the hills. The bounty stemming from the blessing given to Joseph...The blessings of the father are potent above the blessings of my progenitors to the utmost bounds of the everlasting hills" . (Vayechi 49) The tribunal portions of Ephraim and Menashe, the sons of Joseph run across these highlands. In every direction that one looks, the views are emanated with authentic biblical greatness and Jewish nobility. This is the chief feature of the landscape, of your life in it, and you are struck by the feeling of having lived here before.

Since its founding, the settlers have maintained a systematically aggressive and violent attitude to the surrounding farmers and have themselves been subject to some retaliatory attacks. Consequently the place has the look of a fortress.

About 12 months ago when I was last in Palestine, settlers descended on Yannoun, destroyed its generator, polluted its well with dead dogs and killed one man. Most

villagers fled but some days later, accompanied by internationals and Israelis, almost all returned. Two international houses were set up in the upper and lower parts of the village and there has been a continuous international presence ever since. Since then the villagers have been subject to continual harassment though at a lower level. In August a man was beaten up and shot in a dispute over sheep. Settlers roam through the village carrying guns. The day before I arrived, a group of about a dozen children has paraded through accompanied by a teacher. They had two dogs and carried M16 rifles and were, presumably, taking part in some grotesque civics class.

One of the main targets of harassment last year was the olive harvest. If land is unworked for two years then under an old Turkish law, the land reverts to the state. Israel applies this law in its favour, usually allowing the settlers to take over the land. It is of course Humpty-Dumpty law as the West Bank is not part of Israel but is occupied territory and Israel is not the 'state' here. However here, Humpty Dumpty rules, OK? And in this area, olive groves are all that are worked over much of the land.

The army under some pressure from Israeli groups for whom Yannoun has become some kind of symbol have accepted the reality of settler violence and have come up with the following solution. Villagers are banned from picking at all except on designated days. No picking, no settler violence. The designated days range from two to four days in different villages for a harvest which normally takes about two or three weeks. All the days are in Ramadan and after the date when rain often starts. During the designated days the army will allow picking and may protect the farmers against the settlers. Or they may just not stop the farmers picking. Humpty Dumpty remember.

The day after I arrive in Yannoun, a large Israeli group is coming for the day to pick. They come at about midday with a police escort and leave about four in the afternoon. Some are rather nervous about the legality of their presence. Under the Oslo Accord, this area is Zone C and Israeli citizens are not allowed in without permission from the Palestinian Authority which has ceased to exist here. Unless you are a soldier of course or a settler. After their departure, we are only three people and, given settler threats to return after the Israelis have left, we are a little nervous. After phoning around, five women from Nablus, members of another international group, promise to come for a day. In the course of the day, one Israeli also pitches up. He is a member of Black Laundry, a gay, lesbian and trans-gender Israeli group opposed to the occupation. They call themselves this because, yes you have it, they wash their dirty linen in public.

In fact three days of picking pass quite peacefully with only a few settlers hovering around the edges of the fields. All over Palestine there is trouble. Rafah in southern Gaza is being destroyed house by house. The ISM presence there, where Rachel Corrie was murdered, is down to two as no one is now allowed entry to Gaza without press or diplomatic credentials. ISM groups in Jenin and Tulkarem are being arrested *en bloc* as the army makes incursions and there are reports of harassment of olive picking all over. But we are a little oasis of calm, a spiritual retreat. Every evening at 10.00 pm, one of us walks down to the generator to switch it off. This is because Palestinians have had shots fired at them from the heights above when they do it. All night long a string of orange lights illuminate the hill-tops. Itamar is connected to the Israeli grid. On the third day we are informed that the ISM group in Owerta, a nearby village, has been arrested as they walked down to the fields with farmers breaking the

ban on picking and we agree to send over three of our number whilst a couple of the arrested group will come to us.

Early in the morning we walk down the road between the villages. It is forbidden to villagers both by physical blocks and by shots from the watchtowers all along the heights above us. There are olive trees on both side of the narrowing valley which look increasingly abandoned. After an hour we begin to pass Owerta farmers and then we meet up with the one international left in the village, a Californian who looks to be about sixteen. She explains that the army has designated one side of the valley closest to the settlement to be totally forbidden but have allowed picking on the other side. Even so some families have gone into the forbidden zone. We pick with them for a few hours until a man with a donkey asks for company as he goes into the forbidden area to look at his trees. Chris and myself go with him, climbing the slope towards the settlement, at one point passing by a well carved into natural rock with dark water about 3 metres down. It could have been a thousand years old. Eventually he reaches his trees and ties plastic bags to the lower branches to stop deer eating them. He finishes and we walk back to the road. A dun-coloured pickup has stopped on the fenced settler road above us, watching as we go.

After we reach the road, the donkey man fades into the trees just before an army jeep roars around the bend. It stops and the soldiers take our cameras. They then jump back in and drive off, We pursue them and a few minutes later the jeep returns and stops. The soldiers get out and we demand the return of our cameras. First they say that we will only get them at the DCO (District Command Office) then that they will only be returned if we are detained. No, we did not understand this either but obligingly climb into the jeep asking to be detained so that we could have our cameras. The soldiers get in and we drive off. It stops a short way along the track and one soldier gets out to fire shots into the air to frighten farmers in the forbidden zone. We then drive off up into the settlement and into the DCO, a square compound surrounded by single-storey buildings. Oddly, on one side is a large 'mobile gym' donated to the army by a Jewish charity.

The officer in charge demands that we should stand inside a patch of gravel in front of his office after we have roamed around the compound for a bit, a kind of virtual cell. He seems to take things rather seriously, telling us to keep quiet and forbidding the soldiers to talk to us. Some of them blithely ignore this. One is something of a peacenik being totally pissed off with the army. He has only four months left and wants to go to Goa to smoke dope. Another confides that he 'hates those fucking bastards' the settlers. There are a few serious soldiers here, paratroops with red berets tucked into their shoulder straps. They do not seem to take the conscripts very seriously, one telling me that he does not take orders from the young officer. We refuse to take the detention seriously, demanding the return of our cameras and rather taking the piss out of the officer who adopts the posture of walking out of his office and staring expressionlessly at the hills. At one point, with a few soldiers gathered round, I say that I am willing to give them information about the possession of guns in the area. They perk up, even the officer, and I explain that I have seen several men with large guns and suggest that they should apprehend them, pointing up into the hills towards Itamar. There is a moments silence then they all laugh.

After about three hours of this, a police jeep arrives together with a rather swish white 4WD. We are moved into two 'virtual' cells, that is squares of gravel and told that we must be silent, a command promptly ignored as Chris argues with the officer and I

chat to the budding peacenik. A uniformed security man, presumably settler security in the white car, interrogates us. Why were we taking photographs of the settlement fence, he asks. Who is paying us? When Chris and I have stopped laughing he has gone. Finally, the police call me over and explain that we are accused of taking illegal photos of military installations and of running away from the army. The dating on my camera shows that in fact I have not taken any photos on the day at all, all the immediate shots are of village kids. The policeman laboriously enters my details into a computer and tells me to go away. Outside the office, another policeman asks me where I slept last night. Something snaps in my brain and I answer *'In the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shines'*. *'What's that?'* *'It's a song by Leadbelly'* and I croon a few lines. One of the soldiers says that it is actually Nirvana and we sing the whole refrain *'Black girl, black girl, where did you sleep last night'* etc etc and the policeman forgets about his question. (For those interested, I later learn that Nirvana did indeed cover the Leadbelly song in their unplugged album. Thus does culture transcend struggle). We are told to go and a jeep dumps us outside the base. Reality returns. It is dusk and we are at the Hawarra checkpoint where a couple of hundred Palestinians wait to be slowly allowed through to Nablus. We walk through in the opposite direction back to Owerta.

The next day is much the same. A few families pick in the forbidden zone for a couple of hours before a settler is seen standing at the fence above looking down. Fifteen minutes later there is the heavy roar of an army jeep and the soldiers get out to clear the families out. One points to me as I follow him that if I take any more photos he will take me and my camera to prison. I tell him that we have done this scene already. When I return to Yannoun later in the day, I learn that in a third village overlooked by Itamar, settlers had come down and driven all the villagers away, throwing rocks and shooting their guns. The army had not intervened. Picking in peaceful Yannoun had nearly been completed except for the areas hard against the settler fence. These they are leaving until the days of promised protection starting on 28 October when I will be in England.

The following day I leave on the school bus which every day brings three teachers up to this remote village and takes back four older village children to school in the nearest town. On the way down we pass the building housing the new generator with its UN flag flying and a large UN sign on its door and along the electricity distribution line being built with EU funds. Internationals have earlier in the year protected the workers installing this line from being harassed by settlers. As I leave, the Swiss woman with a cross and the words Ecumenical Accompanier on her jerkin gives me an almond nut. It is for my son's birthday which is in two days. To remind him of us, she says

Violence against farmers around Itamar continues after I leave. The army refuses to allow picking on some of the days previously designated saying it is for the farmers' protection. The Israeli government introduces new rules about the status of those who live between the wall and the Green Line and those who live outside it but have land inside it. Basically, all have to register and submit to new controls over their movements. One ISM volunteer is deported. Farmers in Jayyous have to fill in forms concerning their rights to land across the wall. The gate is opened in a random pattern; sometimes only older married women are allowed through, sometimes no one.

In August, 2004, I return to Ben Gurion airport for a third visit but am refused entry as a known ISM activist. It becomes harder and harder for internationals to gain entry.

In December, 2005, there is a large conference on non-violence organised in Bethlehem and a group of us decide to attend from ISM. It is likely that we will be refused entry but we intend to take this opportunity to protest against the ban on ISM volunteers entering Palestine. In the event, I am allowed in after a long interrogation. I go to Hebron for a short visit before the conference.

Tel Rumeida

It is hard to write about this in any terms which relate to normal life. By that I mean life in which certain rules of social conduct are, roughly speaking, obeyed and in which there are consequences to actions which transgress these rules. If, for example, a child throws a stone at you or if an adult screams abuse at you or if a man walks past carrying an assault rifle and leading a fierce dog then in our world it is normal either to take action to protest this or to feel that in some way one has been dropped into an abnormal context, a kind of *Daily Mail* world, the giant asbo land which lies just over the horizon for that publication, and that the best thing to do is to leave as fast as possible. All I can do is ask that you suspend this accustomed social view and take a short journey.

Imagine that we are in a busy Middle Eastern town centre with the usual mess of taxis, buses, cars and pedestrians, all trying to negotiate round market stalls and believing that they, alone, have priority. The stalls are piled with vegetables and fruits. The pavements are crowded partly with pedestrians and partly with the merchandise of the shops spilling out from their doors. It is very noisy and without any obvious order. But it is also quite orderly. No one pushes through the crowds, the vehicles make way for each other without any rancour though with much horn-tooting. We won't stop here. Apart from anything else it is cold, a biting wind coming down from the Turkish highlands and heavy showers turning to sleet. Normally this part of the world is warm tending to hot but this is the 'forty days' which local weather lore says happen each year, chilling the bones but bringing necessary rain. But we are moving on to another part of town.

Just off this market square there are some pyramid-like concrete blocks about three feet high across a side-road which prevent cars passing. Walk about fifty metres down this street towards the portacabin-like structure which lies across it. If we wait outside, after some seconds there will be a buzz and a door will slide open. Go through, wait for a few seconds, go through a metal detector similar to the one at airports and, after another buzz, another door will slide open and we step through, one at a time. To our right there is a steep hill rising up whilst straight in front there is a level road curving slightly to the right. It is about two hundred yards long and lined with two and three storey stone houses with shops on the ground floor. They have balconies with ornate carved windows and green metal awnings over the pavements. I guess that most are eighteenth or nineteenth century with a few modern intrusions. With some refurbishment, it could be a little tourist sight. At the moment, however, all the shop fronts are tightly closed with metal roller shutters and several of the awnings are battered, even collapsed. About half the houses seem derelict with broken

windows. The balconies are all tightly boxed-in with wire mesh and all the unbroken windows have some kind of mesh over them. On various wires over the streets there are small Israeli flags with the blue star of David. Walk along the street, which is deserted, and at the end is a sentry post covered in heavy camouflage canvas. Just past it, the road drops down slightly so that one can look down on to a large new building, three or four stories high with an imposing front and an arched entrance. There are numerous vehicles parked down to the right though none are being driven. Exactly opposite the army post is a rough stone staircase, open on one side, going up the steep hill. It goes up about thirty uneven steps then veers to the left along a dirt track. On the building beside the staircase is a blue plaque which tells the following story: that in 1929, some sixty odd Jews were killed here by Arabs and the nearby Jewish Hadassah, which offered medical services, was destroyed. In 1936, all Jews were removed from the town by the British. In 1977, some Jews returned to the town and in 1994, the new Beit Hadassah was built to commemorate six Jews killed nearby. This is all true. A plaque on the wall of the new building commemorates the fact that it was built with the support of funds from Young Israel of Staten Island. Up the stone stairs and along the dirt track are two or three houses and then, lying below the track, is a school, quite large with two playgrounds, each surrounded by a high mesh fence. You can enter the school from here down the slope though its main entrance is below on the road which runs past the new Hadassah. This is the Cordoba school. No one seems to know just why it is so-called but the self-described spokesperson for the local Israeli settlers has no doubt as to its purpose. Cordoba, he states in a magazine article, was the centre of Muslim power in Spain and this name is evidence of the desire of Islam to reconquer its ancient empires. Go back along the path past the stone steps and up through a narrow passage with high corrugated metal fencing on one side and you will come to another road. Along this path on a metal sheet, you can see the spray-painted slogan '*Gas the Arabs*'. It may be possible to go on to the road though it is more likely to be blocked by rolls of razor wire. On the road, it is possible to go left up to more new buildings or right down hill to where there are some four-storey modern blocks on either side, a sentry post and one shop with its doors half-open. Here we could either go right, down the hill and back to the place where we entered or left, steeply up, to a mosque at the top.

This is the Tel Rumeida district of Hebron, a Palestinian city divided under the Hebron Agreement of 1997 into two parts, 1&2. Hebron 1 is under the control, at least nominally, of the Palestinian Authority whilst Hebron 2 is under the control of the Israeli security forces. Hebron is, uniquely, divided like this because of the status of the ancient sites which lie within it. Here, according to both the Muslim and the Jewish faiths, is the Cave of the Patriarchs bought by Abraham as his and his descendants burial site. Hebron is a holy city to both Muslims and Jews as both recognise Abraham as a founding prophet. This common reverence which, in principle, emphasises the closeness of the two religions has, in practice, caused deep and bloody violence. In 1994, Baruch Goldstein walked into the mosque built over the Cave of the Patriarchs carrying a Galil assault rifle and proceeded to fire into the crowds at prayer. Calmly reloading several times, he killed 29 people and wounded about 100. After being overpowered, he was beaten to death and in subsequent riots, a further 26 Palestinians and 9 Israelis were killed.

Goldstein, an American medical doctor who had achieved notoriety during a period serving in the Israeli army by refusing to treat non-Jews, even fellow soldiers, is now buried in the Kiryat Arba settlement near to Hebron. His tombstone reads:

Here lies the saint, Dr. Baruch Kappel Goldstein, blessed be the memory of the righteous and holy man, may the Lord avenge his blood, who devoted his soul to the Jews, Jewish religion and Jewish land. His hands are innocent and his heart is pure. He was killed as a martyr of God on the 14th of Adar, Purim, in the year 5754 (1994).

and is now a site for visitors to Kiryat Arba.



Since 1994, other Israelis have followed in the footsteps of Dr. Goldstein, taking over houses in the old city of Hebron which have been emptied of their Palestinian residents either by direct violence or by intimidation. In other places, temporary cabins have been built, occupied by settlers, then after a period of consolidation, new buildings are erected and the area is declared to be a 'legitimate' settlement. In each case, the pattern is similar. Israeli soldiers are deployed to protect these intruders, Palestinians are excluded from the area around the houses and the new residents pursue a life of harassment of remaining Palestinians together with the religious study which allows them, if male, to claim exemption from serving in the army together with generous study grants.



Beit Hadassah Hebron

Today is Saturday, shabat, so the settlers are not allowed to drive cars. This means that the streets of Tel Rumeida are used to walk between the upper and lower settlements. Men pass by in twos and threes, usually with guns slung over their shoulder, sometimes carrying both a gun and a child. They will barge into any Palestinian they meet unless they move out of the way; usually the Palestinians keep to the pavement, the settlers walk down the centre of the street. The only vehicles that pass are army jeeps or personnel carriers, changing the guards at the various sentry posts. There is a small group of internationals who live in a flat in a block up the steep hill. They try to keep a permanent presence of two on the top and two on the bottom road, Shubada Street, once the main route out of Hebron and a busy shopping centre. Now there are nineteen families who still hang on to living there. It is afternoon, the children have gone home from the school, the main source of orchestrated friction in the area. The internationals try to stay on the street until five o'clock after which time Palestinians mostly stay tight in their homes. Just before five, a Palestinian man comes through the checkpoint with three children. He asks if we can walk with him down Shubada Street to the stone staircase. The children dance around, apparently oblivious to their surroundings. They go up the stone staircase and turn on to the dirt track. The man turns back, waves and briefly smiles.



Shubada Street

The next day is Sunday, Christmas Day and a holiday now for Palestinians so there is no school. The rain has turned to intermittent sleet and there is a thin, cold wind. There are five of us in the ISM flat so we work out turns to stay on the street, two up, two down and one taking a break. On Shubada Street, the only pedestrians

seem to be us two and a lone soldier in his camouflaged shelter. We stand under the best of the metal awnings and watch the Israeli vehicles pass by. There are two white mini-buses which seem to run a shuttle service back and forth. One was, so the legend on its side tells us, donated to the people of Israel by Mrs. Kriegel in memory of her husband, Amos Kriegel. It is driven by a man with a white beard and, so we are told, a malevolent hatred of Palestinians. At one point, his vehicle has to reverse and manoeuvre to pass an army personnel carrier. We both concentrate on sending out psychic waves to make them collide. This fails but we are not downhearted. In a brief interval of watery sunshine, walking by the stone staircase, the soldier asks if we could stand a little away. He is young, cold and nervous. He says that if the children throw stones he cannot stop them. A little later, a small settler child, maybe six, does try to throw a rock at a Palestinian and the soldier does, in fact, stop him. The rain carries on and we try to float small boats made out of discarded sweet bar wrappers down the flooded gutters and into settler territory. Mostly, this too fails but we are not downhearted. Even one wrapper carried down to become settler rubbish seems a small victory. Every hour or so, a white SUV passes carrying an indeterminate flag with the letters TIPH on it. This is the Temporary International Presence in Hebron, a group of Swedish, Norwegian, Italian and Turkish officials set up under the Hebron Accords to monitor their observation. They have no powers and they make secret reports. A young woman in the front of the SUV smiles at us each time round and gives a small, non-partisan wave. At intervals during the day, a Palestinian woman appears at the doorway of one or other of the occupied houses and beckons us, wordlessly, to take a tray of sweet tea in small glasses and sweet cakes. We pack up at five and go into town to shop. Then we cook Christmas dinner. Vegetable stew, rice and fresh strawberries.

The next day is a school day. This is the procedure. We get out on the street at seven, two at the top and two at the bottom by the two routes into the school. About fifteen minutes later the children start to arrive. Once only a girl's school with a capacity of several hundred, now they take boys as well and there are less than one hundred pupils. The children come partly from the local area and partly through the checkpoint. The five ISM internationals are joined by three members of the Ecumenical Accompaniers, one a young Swiss woman, the others a couple from Dorking. Retired teachers, they have a few moments surreal conversation with one of us, a resident of south-east London, about schools in Lewisham, before the children start to arrive. They come along, alone or in groups. Uniforms, school bags, books under their arms, carrying on the intense, private conversations that all children have. They ignore the army and police vehicles, parked outside Beit Hadassah, the settlers hovering around, the TIPH observers, and climb up the staircase. Only their teachers seem to hurry a little, glancing briefly at us. Towards eight, the flow stops and the Ecumenical Accompaniers go with the last children into the school where they will stay.



The staircase along which children go to school.

There is no big trouble today. No pushing or stone throwing. The army has been told by the Israeli High Court that they must escort these children the few hundred metres from this staircase to the school. Sometimes they do. Sometimes not. A few days before, some Palestinian children were playing football in the street when the local, brigade commander came by. A man who lives with the settlers, he took the ball and kicked it high down the hill over surrounding houses. Football, it seemed was a security threat and banned. Today, the children are taking exams and leave school early. At eleven, the upper street is momentarily full of laughing children, exuberant at being let out early and some even playing the forbidden football. One can hear the same shouts coming from the children's school run inside Beit Hadassah for the settler children.

I leave at two. I have to go to Tel Aviv to pay some money to the lawyer who is representing some workers with ISM who have been refused entry. It is a frantic rush through the madness of travel on the West Bank; a taxi to one check-point, a bus to Jerusalem, another taxi to Tel Aviv. There is only time for a quick hug for the other internationals then it is through the check-point and into the hubbub of normal life. The Israeli lawyer, when I finally meet her, is young, tired and rather harassed. Her life is full of these kind of dashes, last-ditch efforts mostly to help people in far worse circumstances than those of my comrades. In two days I will be home in England, far away from all this.

Two weeks after this, Tel Rumeida was once again invaded by a gang of young settlers, many wearing ski masks, abusing Palestinians and trying to break into various houses. Children going to school had to pass through settlers throwing stones and shouting abuse. The Israeli soldiers standing by did nothing to intervene. One international was arrested and taken away on the pretext that his visa had expired even though he had an appointment booked to obtain a renewal. After a period in detention at Ben Gurion airport, he was released on bail under the condition that he did not return to Tel Rumeida. A little later he was deported. If you want to learn more then log on telrumeidaproject.com where there are videos, photographs and the latest news. You can also send donations directly to them to help finance the international presence.