

Land and Memory: a *SArha* in Palestine

Introduction

I went to Palestine on a quest for understanding and knowledge; a *sarha* is what Arabs call such a spiritual journey. After months of enduring illness, surgery and contemplating my death, I recovered and finished a journey that began many years ago when I became aware of the injustice of the occupation and oppression of an indigenous people across the world as I became involved in Palestinian solidarity work. A journey I had dreamed of undertaking for a long time.

In Victoria I live on the unceded land of the Coast Salish of British Columbia who have resisted for centuries the attempts to eradicate them and their culture; today these people are stronger than ever in the last 500 years. I thank them for their inspiring endurance and generosity.

My journey first took me to Nairobi and the 2007 World Social Forum where I met Razan Zauyter of the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature (APN). She spoke about the killing of more than one million trees in Palestine, the destruction of a land economy and a culture. I returned to Canada to start selling trees for Palestine, to replace the lost trees and to illustrate to Canadians who love trees, how this project resists the attempted military-enforced ecocide of a land and a society. Some trees are hundreds of years old – they call them Romans.



In the current public discourse of the volatile situation in Palestine, no matter how one tries

to talk about Palestinians and their culture and history, the focus of discussion always

turns to Israel and Israelis, so when an invitation to visit Palestine came from Razan, my dream was realized. I could finally meet Palestinians, to listen to them, know them personally, to see and feel their daily life.

Palestinians are presented in our media and history as either faceless victims or nameless terrorists; they are dehumanized in a process that makes it difficult for us to identify with them as friends, colleagues, family and community members. With the weight of history in my luggage, I started this *sarha* in Jordan, home to millions of displaced Palestinians and home of the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature.

Since my journey in October- November, 2008, the world has witnessed the horrors of the brutal invasion and bombing of Gaza; a part of Palestine under total blockade and embargo for two years.

In spite of the closed borders – closed to foreign media and aid workers alike - the news from Gaza reached us; people used electronic media and personal contacts to reveal the truth. The bombing has diminished; the shattered lives of people and the blockade remain and still people are dying.



Even fishermen trying to provide food for the hungry population are attacked by the Israeli navy.

Gaza is just another chapter in the 90 years since Palestine became a British protectorate. But rather than protect Palestinians who had

been under Ottoman rule and give them independence, Britain, supported by religious zealots, both Jewish and Christian, and anti-Semitic prejudice in Britain and throughout Europe, encouraged people of Jewish ancestry to go to Palestine to settle and to wage war against its indigenous people as Britain had done in North America centuries before. Zionists were able to settle & fight for land there to establish a presence with little world regard for the rights of its inhabitants. In fact as this map (a postcard I bought in Jerusalem) shows Zionists, then & now, do not recognize Palestine or its geography or borders with its neighbours.



In 1938, J.S. Woodsworth, the Canadian Parliament leader of the CCF (the original social democrat party in Canada) was asked to support the Zionist settler project by adopting a resolution for the right of Jewish settlers to enter Palestine, he said: *“It was easy for Canadians, Americans and the British to agree to a Jewish colony, as long as it was somewhere else. Why ‘pick on the Arabs’ other than for ‘strategic’ and ‘imperialistic’ consideration...”*

In 1948 after the Holocaust no nation offered land for Jewish survivors to settle and form a

state (or to the Roma and related survivors of the Holocaust). Britain handed Palestine over to the UN which promised to form two new nations; Israel and Palestine. Israel became a nation in 1948: the world, both guilt ridden and complicit, stood silent as it violently expelled 800,000 Palestinians in the NAKBA, the catastrophe. The UN has never kept its promise to back an independent Palestine with any real action.

In 2008, on the 60th anniversary of the Nakba, the UN General Assembly President, Miguel d’Escoto, said that the nations of the United Nations had a collective responsibility for this failure of commitment. He said, in part, *“Today we recall that, 61 years ago this month, the General Assembly adopted the historic resolution 181, calling for the creation of a Jewish State and an Arab State. The State of Israel, founded a year later in 1948, now celebrates 60 years of its existence. Shamefully, there is still no Palestinian State to celebrate. As I stated in my first address to the General Assembly last September, I believe that the failure to create a Palestinian State as promised is the single greatest failure in the history of the United Nations. It has been 60 years since some 800,000 Palestinians were driven out of their homes and property, becoming refugees and an uprooted and marginalized people.*

We cannot avoid the bitter irony that next month we mark the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which enshrines the right to self-determination of these very same people...”

Canadian human rights law professor John Peters Humphrey prepared the first draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was signed in 1948 by most nations including Canada, USA, Britain & Israel. It proclaims the freedom and rights of people to self-determination as well as the freedom of expression, movement and assembly.

Article 13 states the right of exiles to return to their homeland, yet I can go to Palestine, but 6 million Nakba descendents cannot return to the land of poetry. The exiled poet, Mourid Barghouti, wrote that, *“His poem is my personal history. His gun took from us the land*

of the poem and left us with the poem of the land....”

Canada does nothing to honour its signature and the role of Canada originally had in this wonderful document. And does nothing for the hopes of 6 million Palestinians and their descendants, in exile since 1948 and 1967.

I do not think of Palestinians of victims but the great poet, Darwish who died last year, said, *“we are victims of a map.”* A glance at this map says it all – Palestine is 7% of its original size and daily annexation of its land by Israel means it is shrinking all the time.



On this small area, half the size of Vancouver Island where I live, four million Palestinians are determined to live on and with their land: people who live lives so similar to ours. They have families; they celebrate birthdays and weddings, go to work and school, and enjoy friends and good food. People who have dreams of better times – if not for themselves, for their children.

In Amman we met the enthusiastic (all volunteer) board and members of APN. They are mainly Palestinians with no right of return, so when they raise funds for tree planting they transfer their donations to the Palestine Agricultural Relief Committee (PARC) to obtain and distribute the trees – mainly olive, but also citrus, almond, date palms and other food bearing trees. APN also distributes trees within Jordan – to schools and needy areas.

Palestine

After a few days of orientation by APN and meeting some of the Palestinian community in

Amman, my partner and husband, Gerd Weih and I set out for Palestine but first we crossed the border into ‘Israel’ on the Allenby bridge over the River Jordan, neither wide nor deep, but a trickle in a sandy gulch, its waters diverted further north by Israel. Not a pleasant experience. We were shouted at, asked personal questions; we showed our passports 16 times, feeling very intimidated, but always remembering the friend who drove us to the border and 6 million other Palestinians cannot go through this procedure but we could.

Three hours later we entered the ancient city of Jericho. It was full of Christian tourists who see only historic sites as they travel and are probably not aware of the daily harassment by the occupiers or that the local Palestinian police force recently had been ordered to stay off the streets while the Israeli army ransacked garden shops looking for fertilizer that could be used in bomb making.

We soon were guests in the home of Arwa & Ekrima for a welcome barbeque outside in the midst of an ongoing building project, relatives and families, children playing and running around us.

Arwa took me into the house to show her beautiful embroidery – done before she had children and a fulltime job. For the first, but not the last, time we saw how much Palestinians love and care for their children.



It is their hope for a better life for their children that sustains Palestinians in the struggle to somehow live a normal life while peacefully resisting the brutal occupation.



***“The surface is politics, history and religion,
but under that there are people and reality”***

*Merlijn Twaalfhoven, Dutch composer, organizer of Jerusalem
underground Arts Festival*

The next day we were taken to new agricultural projects – we visited date palm orchards. Dates are a highly desirable crop: the tree lives for 70 years and produces 100 kilos of fruit annually; they grow well in this hot, below sea level area. The original shoots had to be bought on the black market for \$100 from Israeli farmers who are forbidden



to sell them to Palestinians. Now the trees are thriving and producing their own 10-15 shoots per tree to start new orchards as the PARC agronomists showed us. Dates keep well for two years if stored in a cool place, so they are a good crop in the unstable export market; PARC has built underground coolers for date storage. PARC also has a hostel for agriculture graduates, including veterinarians, to stay and work in while they do their practical field training. We spent hours talking to these students, who want to stay and live in a peaceful country, but seemed to have little sense of how to achieve their hopes.

We also saw a pilot project of tilapia ponds and within hours ate the fish cooked beautifully in a restaurant in town. The fish have multiplied into the thousands from a few secretly purchased from Israelis. We were constantly reminded by the incidents of daily life how closely the Palestinian economy is related to that of Israel. So when nearly 200 Palestinian organizations ask us to boycott Israel, we have to do it, because they cannot. Recent reports from Israel in mainstream media say that the boycott is having an effect, particularly in European trade.

At our fish lunch we met Da’ud, an old fighter who was blinded years ago when he was tortured in an Israeli prison. He carries a detailed personal and national history in his head. His was the first of many stories we heard of torture and suffering in jails. But this seems to strengthen Palestinian resolve for self-determination. As our host, agronomist Ismail, founder of PARC, said: *there is no hope without struggle.*

Our journey took us to the northern tip of the West Bank – a short distance, comparable to a 2 hour drive from Victoria to Nanaimo. But – we had to stop, wait and be scrutinized at many checkpoints – really just a few of the 351 checkpoints staffed by stern young men and women, dehumanized by their military clothes, gear and the big machine guns they cling to. Some of our hosts could not travel all the way with us. Palestinians have ‘pass cards’ like South Africans used to have. They can only travel in specified parts of the three segments of land now comprising the shrinking West Bank. The expression “apartheid” has a brutal reality in this area, the campaign against Israeli oppression reflects similar conditions and responses to the successful campaign against the former South Africa regime.



We stopped at a farm house for the usual hospitality – Turkish-style coffee and an exchange of news. Because our Jericho host could not go past a northern checkpoint, the farmer took us through to our lodging at the PARC hostel. Not before a sudden detour up a hill and into fields while he waited for a mobile checkpoint to move on. This control of people’s movement, the need for permits to visit family, friends and their own land beyond the wall-fence is just part of the constant humiliation of the occupation.

Farming and the close connection to the land is important to all Palestinians; even if they live in a city, somewhere the family has land they can return to visit or to live. It is common for many generations to live in one house, usually with separate self-contained flats on each floor overlooking well tended gardens. It is this land, stolen daily, that is the core of the struggle for Palestine.



We met farm union officials who told us that the Palestinian Authority does not give much support to agriculture – in spite of the fact that more and more Palestinians turn to farming as a possible livelihood – as other work disappears. Cooperatives are thriving as an important way of sharing land, resources, knowledge and marketing; we met with many cooperatives in the next days – almond raising and marketing, olive oil presses and processing, hothouse vegetables for local consumption- because attempts to export fresh produce failed because border guards kept the trucks waiting for several days in the heat until the vegetables rotted.

It was in a community on the northern edge of Palestine where a cooperative leader told us that Israelis were turning wild pigs loose on the Palestine side to uproot gardens and frighten children. These pigs are well known in Europe to be dangerous to humans and can destroy a large garden in minutes.

I just read in a report on an expanding Israeli illegal settlement, built on land stolen from Haris and surrounding villages such as Biddya and Deir Istya:

“Revava is also responsible for polluting the nature that surrounds it by not managing its sewage disposal in an environmentally sustainable manner. Trees are dying, land is unusable. Around many of the trunks of olive

and cherub trees there are traces of wild pigs trying to get to the roots of the trees. IWPS (International Women’s Peace Service, whose office is in Hares, Palestine) volunteers were told that these pigs are not naturally here in Palestine. Once they were brought they could easily and quickly become a huge number because they don’t have a natural enemy. Muslim and Jewish populations do not domesticate or eat them.”

Yet another threat and more disrespect – as well as a major environmental danger.

Many of the farms and orchards we visited were close to the wall-fence (in such a small country, nearly everything is). One day we visited an olive orchard and stayed to chat with a family harvesting the crop. It seemed an idyllic place, beautiful old trees, laden with fruit, teenagers up the tree and older people picking at ground level. We were immediately invited to sit down and out came the thermos of coffee. Cups were passed around by an older woman, the grandmother of the children up the tree.



But we could see the fence festooned with razor wire with a gate closed and rarely opened for farmers to access their now annexed land. Months before a fourteen year old boy was shot and killed for going too close to the fence. Everywhere there are cameras and sensors on the barricade; twice I got too close and soon jeeps with soldiers appeared out of nowhere – we jumped in our car and were off to another olive grove where we met a farmer whose whole family is not allowed to go to the fields beyond the fence. Often when people do get a permit they find their harvest gone or their trees uprooted. In some communities only 30% ever get a ‘pass card’ to go through a checkpoint.

Olives, mainly to produce oil, are the major cash crop for Palestine, so it is no surprise that more than a million olive trees, many hundreds of years old, have been and still are destroyed and stolen. We visited olive presses where 200 kilos of olives can produce 50 kilos of oil. There are many presses, some private, some coo-op & some organic; some are trying to attain EU production standards for export there. In Canada we can purchase *Zaytoun* organic fair trade olive oil at 10,000 Villages shops.

This is one reason why the TREE CAMPAIGN of APN is so important; it focuses on the economic and ecological destruction of Palestine as it offers hope and solidarity while planting replacement trees – APN is now working on the 2nd million trees. This campaign also gives activists all over the world the opportunity to offer concrete solidarity by buying replacement trees.

This farmer can no longer get to his lands to work –they are behind this the razor wire – overlooked by an Israeli settlement.



As construction on the wall-fence and new settlements continues daily, relentlessly, it cuts in and out of Palestinian land, separating communities, families and stealing land and trees. The cleared space beside the fence alone has destroyed hundreds of trees; add to that the great swathes of exclusively Israeli only highways that link illegal settlements to Israeli cities. We visited villages surrounded by the wall that requires people to line up at randomly or rarely opened checkpoints to go to school or work.

The real purpose of the wall-fence is to divide Palestine from Palestine; Palestinians from Palestinians and to increase Israeli control of Palestinian movement and for Israelis to

profit from stolen land and resources – space for new settlements, rich farmland and water sources – and to humiliate Palestinians.

We were invited to visit the clinic and the municipal office of Jayyous; we went up to the roof to see the exclusively for-Israelis highway scarring the farmland; it also is fenced to keep Palestinians away. In May, 2009 we read that the government of Norway, certainly one of the most progressive in the world “has invested pension funds in Lev Leviev’s company Africa-Israel.



Leviev is the co-owner of Leader Management and Development, the company that is building the Israeli settlement of Zufim” on Jayyous land.

The municipal council continues in a letter to the Norwegian government, “According to media reports, Danya Cebus, a subsidiary of Leviev’s company Africa-Israel, has also built Israeli settlements on Bil’in’s land, as well as the settlements of Har Homa and Maale Adumim around Jerusalem. Leviev is destroying the olive groves and farms that have sustained Jayyous and other Palestinian villages for centuries, profiting from human rights abuses and violating international law. We call on the government and people of Norway to follow the lead of UNICEF, Oxfam, and most recently the British government, and end Norway’s relationship with Leviev’s companies due to their construction of Israeli settlements.

In 2002 the Israel government began building its wall deep inside Jayyous, up to 3.5 miles from the border with Israel, in order to annex 75% of Jayyous’ land (1700 acres) as well as six underground wells to Zufim. 130 acres of Jayyous’ land have been destroyed, 4,000 trees uprooted and 75% of our land cut off. The land

being cut off for Zufim's expansion had been used to grow fruits and vegetables which sustain our village's economy.....The Israeli government is now bulldozing more of our farmland and olive trees for a new wall route. The new route would still annex most of Jayyous' best farmland and its water resources, stealing Jayyous' land for Leviev to expand Zufim..." from The Municipality of Jayyous, The Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign, Jayyous, Land Defense Committee, Jayyous, see:

<http://bdsmovement.net/?q=node/395>

A bulletin from August, 2009: In another stunning blow to Israeli settlement-builder Lev Leviev, the Israeli business magazine Globes Online has reported that BlackRock Inc., one of the world's largest investment management firms, has divested from Leviev's Africa-Israel Investments.

<http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article10736.shtml>

Update:

<http://israelpalestineblogs.com/2009/08/27/blackrock-divests-from-leviev%e2%80%99s-africa-israel/>

On September 22, 2009 Mohammad Othman was arrested re-entering Palestine from Jordan and is still (November, 2009) in jail. He is a Human Rights activist with the Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign against the dispossession of Palestinian farmers and against the involvement of Israeli and international business in the violations of Palestinian human rights. His home is Jayyous and he was returning from a trip to Norway where he spoke about the Apartheid Wall and Zufim, the settlement destroying Jayyous. He had met with senior officials, including Norwegian Finance Minister Kristen Halvorsen. Norway's National Pension Fund recently announced that it had divested from Elbit, the Israeli company which provides both Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and other military technology for Occupation forces, as well as security systems for the Wall and settlements. For more information and action contact: freemohammad@stopthewall.org <http://freemohammadothman.wordpress.com>

Another Palestinian human rights defender, Muhammad Srour, an eye witness at the UN Fact Finding Mission on Gaza, was also arrested when he returned from Geneva. This

arrest was a clear act of reprisal against Srour for speaking out about Israel's violations of international law. Arresting Palestinians as they return from travel is yet another Israeli tactic to try to silence Palestinian human rights defenders. It complements the overall policy of isolation of the Palestinian people behind checkpoints, walls and razor wire.



After Jayyous we visited Qalqilya, a town completely surrounded by the wall-fence. We sat under the eight metre high wall with the farmer who tries to grow vegetables on the land left to him, beside the wall. He told us that a chemical plant is on the other side and his crops are polluted by its emissions. In other places we could see factories on the other side of the fence & an environmental engineer told us that the sewage from many of them flows into Palestine; we were also told of the cruel irony that a prison for Palestinians ejects its sewage back to Palestine as well.

In a village right against the fence the mayor told us cancer is increasing – he said he thought the Israelis were using microwaves on his town. Other reported a barrage of loud vulgar noise aimed at homes at night, making rest impossible.

The mayor took us outside so we could see Al-Ali's cartoons on the village wall. These



cartoons always have the figure of a small boy, Hanzala; he is Naji Al-Ali himself as a child when expelled from his Palestinian homeland. He

said that his character was, *"my icon which safeguards my soul from committing mistakes... he is the ever alert conscience."* After receiving many death threats, Naji was assassinated in the UK in 1987. His cartoons and Hanzala have become icons of the struggle.

We were told many times of documented increases of illness. In Tulkarm where 40% of its land is now behind the wall and where factories are built along the confiscated side of the wall, there are increases in spontaneous abortions, miscarriages, asthma and other conditions

Many men have left Palestine – into exile, to the gulf countries to earn money or have been jailed or killed. We met women who were struggling to support their families.

Women's groups are trying to create economic opportunities for women – soap making, preserving food and Za'atar (the traditional herb mixture of Palestinian cooking) and other income generating projects. Grants to provide seeds, plants, trees and animals for food security and income are very important to women-headed households and peasants families dispossessed by the Wall and land theft. We also attended a workshop where women described how they coped with the trauma of home invasion & the loss of family members – by death or jail.

In Saneria, near Qalqilya, we were treated to the most traditional Palestinian meals in a farm home. We ate Mssakhan, taboun bread



covered with olive oil, almonds and onions with chicken barbequed with sumac – along with mezza, the small salads and appetizers that contain all the local produce. Later we stopped beside an ancient stone wall around the old village and climbed up into a small vaulted chamber in the wall with the taboun oven set in floor. The skilled baker sat with the spirit of centuries of women before her, hands moving with assurance, flattening the dough, flipping it onto the oven walls, and minutes later the bread was steaming yeasty fragrance and given to us, ready to eat.

Palestinian hospitality and generosity are unstinting and generous; food and drink appear like magic before one and it take a strong will to keep saying no to more. Just a quick stop beside a field of green herbs brought the farmer running to our car, her hands full of the Za'atar herb she grows.



Just before I left Canada I read. **PALESTINE WALKS: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape** by Raja Shehadeh. He writes, *"...for every story there is an ending."* His memoir is a guided journey; the reader goes with the author as he remembers and reflects on his sarhat around his home city of Ramallah, for the last twenty-seven years. He has walked many routes, many times over in this period and is able to vividly express *"the language of the hills."*

Whenever I saw a road or path end in razor wire I thought of him and his sadness at the physical destruction of his homeland as he reflects, *"...the biography of these hills is... my own."*



As land is stolen (for checkpoints as well as settlements & roads), Palestinians try to use the few scraps of empty ground to replace lost land. One farmer had planted new olive seedlings which he watered (they need several years of irrigation to get established) by a cistern he had built on a hillside to collect rainwater. Palestinians are forbidden to drill new wells or to dam or divert streams. New agricultural development is always dependant on existing water supplies or rain. Wells have been stolen along with confiscated lands.

Palestinians use 20% of the amount of water Israelis use but must pay four times as much as Israelis to buy back their own water. One village refused to pay for years, but the Palestine Authority (PA), the central government then paid it. Many people do not trust the PA, it is, after all, a government under occupation and as such must collaborate on many levels with the occupier.

In 2009, I helped organize a cross-Canada tour of activists from Bil'in, a village near Ramallah. Special guests from Palestine and Israel spoke of the weekly non-violent vigil in Bil'in, Palestine, where many local people and international visitors have been injured and arrested. In April 2009 an Israeli soldier shot a high-velocity teargas canister at Palestinian activist Bassam Ibrahim Abou Rahme at close range during a protest against the Israeli wall in Bil'in. He was killed for participating in this peaceful action against a lawless takeover of their community.

The Israel lawyer, Emily Schaeffer (in photo) working for Bil'in's case against illegal settlements and the Wall spoke in Victoria. She showed a video of the death of Bassam and spoke of the effect of the Wall on life in

this village and the building of settlements on stolen land for nearly five years Bil'in has held weekly non-violent vigils against Israel's Apartheid Wall which annexes and isolates the village's land.

They brought their actions to Canada, a court case against Green Park International and Green Mount International, both Quebec registered construction companies; Bil'in was trying to sue these companies for their role in helping to construct the illegal Israeli settlement of Mattityahu East on village land. The Fourth Geneva Convention as well as



Canada's own Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act, prohibit occupying forces from establishing settlements at the expense of indigenous populations. Bil'in's Popular Committee Against the Wall and Settlements sought to hold both companies accountable for their complicity in the illegal annexation of their land. Unfortunately the Canadian judge ruled against the case being heard in a Canadian Court. For updates on Bil'in see: <http://www.bilin-village.org/>

However harassment of Bil'in activists has since increased; leaders are being hauled out of their beds by Israeli soldiers, and beaten and threatened. There is no breaking of the spirit of this community. Bil'in's children, participated in a recent "We Want to Sleep" demonstration captured on a YouTube video <http://bit.ly/HGJWx> Yet non-violent actions rarely made mainstream news, but Bil'in and other activists continue to show the world how they struggle against oppression – more than 18 non-violent demonstrators have been killed in recent years by Israeli military. We need to support these actions & get the news of peaceful Palestinians out to the world

which is told to believe all Palestinians are terrorists.



Just as I edit this story I read – on the internet from Jordan- that Palestinians had pulled down part of the wall in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall – an event beloved of our media –who don't even write about the Palestine Wall, longer & higher than Germany's ever was.

Bil'in is not the only dirty connection Canada has with the military occupiers of Palestine. Canada sells military equipment parts to USA arms companies that export to Israel. Richard Saunders of Ottawa's Coalition to Oppose the Arms Trade (COAT) has documented how we collaborate in war crimes with our exports.

Through our taxes and through our Canada Pension Plan (CPP) investment we support war on Palestine to the tune of \$100 million (between 2006-2008). We give grants and perks to the Canadian Association of Defence and Security Industries (CADSI). CADSI supports its 540 members by highlighting their capabilities on its website and sponsoring events to assist their domestic sales and international exports.

“COAT's report lists more than 50 Canadian military exporters that have supplied a wide range of essential components and/or services for three major US weapons systems that are used by the Israeli Air Force: the F-15, F-16 and AH-64. These fighter/bomber aircraft and helicopter attack gunships were the main varieties of weapons systems employed by Israel during the recent aerial bombardments of Gaza. In an effort to document Canadian contracts that have supplied these US weapons systems, COAT's report provides hundreds of

links to corporate and government sources”.
Quote from: www.coat.ncf.ca

Canada has also signed a Free Trade Agreement with Israel, making it easier for its products to be sold in Canada; for example, clothing in Mountain Equipment Cooperative shops and wines sold in BC and Ontario. Recently the Liberal Party of Canada has defended its support for a Free Trade Agreement with Colombia, a country infamous for its human rights abuses and assassination and jailing of labour, human rights and peace activists. The Liberals say that “a stronger Colombian economy” will create conditions for an improved human rights situation. Yet in the more than 10 years of Free Trade with Israel no political party has raised the constant violations of human rights in Israel as having any connection to trade – or showing any improvement.

Al Aqaba is a small village in the north where we met with the mayor Sami in his “office”, a circle of benches under a wide carob tree.

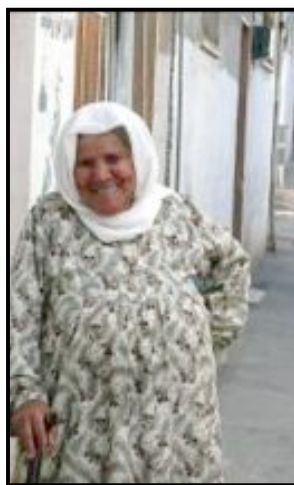


Sitting in his electric wheelchair (he was shot when he was sixteen while working in his family's fields) he explained that the Israelis have forbidden the village the right to build offices or any new buildings; the school is in a private home. They used to have a population of 1000 peoples, but 700 have left, mostly to neighbouring communities so they can have homes; the kindergarten had about 100 children, many from other villages come in daily. Another reason people have moved away is the nocturnal presence of the Israeli army. It comes down from a visible hillside camp in the night and practises urban warfare, terrifying the residents. When the mayor complains he is told that the area resembles Lebanon and they are preparing to re-invade that country.

But women sit in a workshop doing piecework sewing for Israeli garment industries (in a building provided by EU countries) and the British Council built a modern clinic in Aqaba – more examples of “guilt money”. However non-violent resistance continues. In 2009 a peace camp was held in the village and now the village is seeking support for the creation of a “The Peace House” where international solidarity activists can come and stay and learn more about life under military occupation even though homes have been demolished in the community and new construction is forbidden by the occupiers. For more information contact:aqaba2006(at)yahoo.com

Some groups in Palestine consider foreign aid as a disempowering force. We were told that charity from the EU, USA and other countries is not what Palestine needs. Municipalities and the Palestinian Authority accept many kinds of aid from sewage systems to arms; friends said this ‘hush money’ stops people from working for social change and self-determination; it implicates the recipient group as a collaborator in its own subjection. Palestinians want solidarity, not charity.

Within Palestine there are refugee camps of people driven out of the north from what is now Israel. These camps hold the collective memories of lost communities; every camp is collection of displaced village or town.



One morning we went to Farakan Camp near Tubas. Old men were sitting outside taking coffee, children were going to school, and we met our friend’s Aunt Jalala on the street, cheerful and laughing.

It was really hard to grasp that 500 Israeli soldiers had left the camp the day before. They had occupied the camp for 36 hours, trashing the home they commandeered as headquarters, then they had done a house-to-house invasion, locking

people up and stealing their valuables, beating some and in the end arrested and took away two young men. Within hours people were cleaning up the foul mess and life was returning to ‘normal.’ It is this resilience under oppression that gives Palestinians the strength to continue. As one person told us, “we have to be flexible, expect the unexpected and get on with our lives.”



We asked about the closing of settlements in the West Bank which was much publicized in our media. Four settlements near Jenin were closed – Israelis did not like living in them. So they were razed, and I mean razed, not a floor tile or plant remains. Nothing of use left. There are more than 250 illegal settlements with a population of almost half a million Israelis in Palestine and more are being created daily. We saw no letting up in the placement of ‘facts on the ground’ as the Israelis call these colonies strategically insinuated into Palestine so that a viable independent Palestine becomes harder and harder to visualize.

We saw the site of an abandoned military camp (on a hill top as are most Israeli sites) where nothing was left but cacti. An attempt to grow almonds on this waste land is underway. Almonds are a fairly new crop, but again they are economically viable as they keep and ship well.

The beautiful old city of Nablus, the capital under Ottoman rule, is a medieval maze of pathways, stairs leading down and up to vaulted rooms through both narrow and wide covered pathways between the stone buildings. We went into a spice shop in a cavern where the spices were lined up in colourful sacks and behind the shop was the

owner's museum of family life – teapots, baby carriages, smoking pipes and other delights. I left with a big bag of saffron. The Turkish bath house with many chambers was being heated up for women's night; I longed to stay on, get washed and scrubbed and then lounge on the divans around a fountain.



The last of 60 soap factories still operates in Nablus in a vaulted medieval building that once belonged to Razan's grandfather. The olive oil and lye are stirred for

days in great vats; then workers carry the liquid soap over stone floors and up stairs as smooth as ice rinks, to pour it out to solidify on a vast tennis court size floor. Then it is cut into bars and stacked in cones to dry that look like modern sculpture. Boxes of wrapped soap awaited sales – but it is so difficult to export through Israeli borders that there are few markets willing to take on the hassle and red tape.



As we were walked around we came to an open courtyard where there was a pile of rubble in place of a house. Across from it we read the memorial plaque to the family that was buried alive in its home by the Israeli military bulldozers in 2002.

Around a corner and under a dark archway we climbed up a narrow staircase into the small apartment of Amreh and her children. Amreh's husband killed 2 Israeli soldiers

after he saw them killing school girls in 2004. Since then she has seen him in jail three times; her children, Owal , 6 yrs. Nasser, 12 years, are allowed infrequent visits. He is dying of cancer; appeals to help him or release him for hospice by international agencies go unheeded. Her children sat quietly under their parents' wedding photo.



Before I left Canada I had read about a reporter who asked questions of a woman who had lost her son. She replied to him, saying, "*What good does it do to answer your questions? Will they bring my son back?*" I thought of that conversation as I talked with Amreh – nothing I said would return her husband. But I hope that by telling her story and many others I might help prevent more tragedy as we work in solidarity together.

There are more than 11,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails, many held without trial or charge; this includes more than 100 women and 330 children. More than 800 are being held in "administrative detention," meaning that they are imprisoned (indefinitely) without charge. International solidarity and governments need to act on this illegal detention and mass imprisonment of Palestinians. Palestinian MPs, teachers, mothers giving birth, many teenagers - all subjected to cruel and harsh conditions, lack of adequate shelter, lack of medical care and limited contact with the outside. Torture and forced confessions are also reported. Palestine is reported to have one Israeli prisoner.

During our stay in Palestine we had many insights into the daily lives of Palestinians. Although we met some politicians, it was social movements and ordinary people who interested me the most. We were guest of PARC (Palestine Agricultural Relief Committee) and had a meeting with Dr.

Khalil, the director of PARC in Ramallah. He told us that social movements, groups like PARC, that foster cooperation and local development, are the models for the future Palestine. Also, these examples of good governance in NGOs and positive activity in creative non-violent resistance and continuing hope, after loss and destruction – rebuilt and building new internal support systems - are a threat to Israel policies.

He believes that Israel and the USA want to push Palestinians into extremism, easier to crush and to justify brutal response, so building positive infrastructures is vital to political survival as well as economic survival. He said this offers real hope to the young people who often see no viable future and are trapped between despair and extremism. I thought of the young men we met in Nablus, hanging out, dressed in a combination of punk & radical Chic.



PARC has paid staff and facilities to help farmers; it accepts funding from many sources, but refuses funds from the USA government because it demands access to a group's personnel records, 'for anti-terrorist investigation.' It is through PARC and the Palestinian Farmers' Union that Palestinians can get support for the growing importance of agriculture to people. Not only traditional farmers, but many new farmers and those who have lost lands and other financial sources benefit from their programs.

Through PARC, APN has distributed more than one million trees, mainly olive but also almond, date, citrus and pomegranate, to

replace those destroyed and stolen by Israel. APN has launched its second million trees campaign – a tree costs only \$8; I and many others continue to fund raise for this campaign. After seeing reclaimed land with newly planted trees, farmers proudly sharing almonds, thriving cooperatives and whole families harvesting olives, these trees are fixed in my mind as symbols of Palestinian freedom. The destruction of a tree is a symbol of the destruction of a whole people and their environment. Genocide through ecocide as one activist describes it.

We stayed in a small community on the high slopes of the northern part of the West Bank, a lovely place to walk around and be greeted by friendly people. In Zababoda there are two mosques and four Christian churches; 70% of the population is Christian; our friend said that people live together peacefully without any religious friction. Walking around in the evening it was hard to image war, conflict and occupation in this indeed peaceful community- if one ignored the graffiti.



One of the most volatile places in Palestine is Jerusalem – once a peaceful multi-faith religious community, now a zone of constant conflict as the Palestinians (Moslem and Christians) are harassed and forced out of their homes. This is a continuation of a long and bitter total disregard for international law and human rights. The complex

background to the present is excellently explained in the film: *JERUSALEM: The East Side Story*. A story which the director says shows that the big loser of this conflict is Jerusalem itself.



A poignant personal memoir of the 1948 occupation of Jerusalem and the ensuing Nakba is given by Ghada Karmi in her remembrances of childhood tragedy: *In Search of Fatima*. It is supposedly a holy city for the three

religions, but what holiness can remain after decades of relentless war?

An important example of international-Israeli- Palestinian cooperation and peace activism is in Jerusalem. The ceaseless destruction of family dwellings by Israel military forces is challenged by volunteers who try to stop or delay home destruction and then return to rebuilt destroyed homes.

Founded by Jeff Halper, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions states, *"ICAHD is a non-violent, direct-action group originally established to oppose and resist Israeli demolition of Palestinian houses in the Occupied Territories. As our activists gained direct knowledge of the brutalities of the Occupation, we expanded our resistance activities to other areas - land expropriation, settlement expansion, by-pass road construction, policies of "closure" and "separation," the wholesale uprooting of fruit and olive trees and more..."*



Halper spoke in Victoria this year on a tour with his new book. (Shown signing his book after a well-attended talk.) His book, *An Israeli in Palestine*, like his life and activism, is an unfinished work, but he hopes that

readers involved in grassroots activism for Palestine or anywhere on any issue will find it of value.

For Halper the act of lying in front of a bulldozer and then being restrained on the ground beside his Palestinian friend, Salim, was the act that moved him from protest to resistance. In June, 2009 we learned that the home of Salim and Arabiya Shawamreh in Anata, which has already been demolished by the Israeli authorities four times, had been served with yet another destruction order.

The area around Jerusalem is ringed with the wall, Israeli- only fenced highways, up to 75 m. wide, settlements on every hill and the Wall. They contribute to the narrowing of Palestine to a thin strip that divides the south West Bank from the north West Bank. There are about 200 settlements in Palestine – more accurately described as colonies of the occupiers; their construction that defy international law. *"Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, are illegal and an obstacle to peace and to economic and social development [... and] have been established in breach of international law."* International Court of Justice Ruling.

Halper says there are now about ½ million Israelis living in these illegal enclaves insinuated into Palestinian territory – the Israelis call them 'facts on the grounds'. Facts they may or may not be; but these intrusions are always strategically located on



hills, stealing not only land and agricultural resources but also wells and access to aquifers. The largest settlement is Mala Adommin, outside Jerusalem, with about 50,000 illegal inhabitants – we took our photo from the highway – as usual it is on a hilltop.

Their ultimate purpose is to so fragment Palestine that it cannot be an integral contiguous state and the 2-state solution becomes impossible. To drive Palestinians out of their homeland; this is the policy ever since the Nakba. President Golda Meir did her best to get rid of Palestinians; she was rightly accused of “*wanting the dowry, but not the bride.*”

On a previous visit to Victoria Halper was accompanied by Salim whose home had been destroyed twice then. He showed us photos of his family’s brutal eviction and the told us of the lasting trauma suffered by his children when they were forced out of their home to watch its destruction. Those images have stayed in my mind all these years, more powerful than statistics and cold facts.

In June, 2009 the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the home of Salim and Arabiya Shawamreh in Anata, which has already been demolished by the Israeli authorities four times, can be demolished yet again. The Shawamreh home has become a symbol of resistance to Israel’s house demolition policies and deserves our support. Contact the ICAHD office at [info\(at\)icahd.org](mailto:info(at)icahd.org) or telephone 00972-2-624-5560.

Here are excerpts from ICAHD’S report:

“Since 1967, the Israeli authorities have demolished more than 24,000 Palestinian homes in the Occupied Territories, some as “collateral damage” in military operations (4000 homes were demolished in the recent invasion of Gaza), some as collective punishment (the obliteration of the Jenin refugee camp in 2002 being just one example... In a particularly cruel twist used by the courts, thousands of Palestinian families have been forced to demolish their own homes under pressure of fines and imprisonment. Tens of thousands of demolition orders remain outstanding in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and can be implemented at any time....on July 9, 1998, when the Civil Administration, Israel’s military government in the West Bank, came to demolish the home of Salim and Arabiya Shawamreh and their six children in “Area C” of Anata, northeast of Jerusalem... The courageous resistance of the Shawamreh

family and the international attention the demolition received, put the issue of house demolitions on the political map. Over the years many local and international NGOs have highlighted this issue, including Amnesty International... Much of this success is due to the Shawamreh family’s resistance.

It is clear that the Shawamrehs cannot find justice in the Israeli court system. One of the family’s chief claims, rejected out of hand by the Court, argues that the Fourth Geneva Convention forbids an Occupying Power from extending its law and administration into an occupied territory.... Governments will only act if pushed by the people. We call on you to raise your voices against the impending demolition of the Shawamreh home – and in so doing against Israel’s overall policy of demolishing Palestinian homes as it attempts to drive them from the country.”

It is really hard to convey the emotional impact of the wall



defining and dividing so many Palestinian communities – it is massive and ugly, a constant horizon of concrete. The creative Palestinians and many visitors have broken the bleakness of it with images of powerful words and artwork. We were told that on the Israeli side the wall has earth banked up against it with parks and planting, making it barely noticeable.

A women’s group trying soap and za’atar production for women’s income generating passes on samples of their products to me.



Every person we met was a legitimate representative of Palestine, yet few of them will ever be present or heard in negotiations about their future. One person who has gained international respect as a representative of the Palestinian cause is Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, a medical doctor and Member of Parliament.

He recently wrote a powerful essay quoted on www.palestinechronicle.com He says in that essay: *“In all its forms, resistance is an internationally sanctioned right of the Palestinian people. Under this strategy, however, it must resume a peaceful, mass grassroots character that will serve to revive the culture of collective activism among all sectors of the Palestinian people and, hence, to keep the struggle from becoming the preserve or monopoly of small cliques and to promote its growing impetus and momentum.”*



So many of the people we met are part of that grassroots character – farmers, students, single parents, teachers, artists, writers, social movement activists – that I left Palestine sadly but with renewed hope that Palestinians determined to live in peace and dignity will achieve their goal.



I share Dr. Barghouti’s belief that for success we must , *“ operate on the principle that while the Palestinian cause is a Palestinian, Arab and Muslim one, it is above all a humanitarian cause that cries out to all in the world who cherish humanitarian principles and values.”*

Moved by the endurance, resilience and determination of so many Palestinians, we left with our own determination to return and-

more important, to continue our solidarity work at home until Palestine achieves the justice its people seek.

We were able to donate \$4000 we raised from supporters to Palestine; all funds we raise are used for solidarity, we pay our own expenses.

After a last evening in Jericho with Ekrima and Awra we once again crossed the Allenby Bridge, endured the hassles of leaving Israel and found our Palestinian friend waiting patiently on the Jordan side to collect us and return to Amman. We carried an olive seedling in our hearts.



LEBANON

We were invited to Lebanon to see Palestinian communities there and the results of the last Israeli war against Lebanon.

Eight Canadians were killed in that war, including a UN observer and three others UN workers, which Israel claims was “a mistake” at a clearly-marked United Nations Observation Post. Just to show clearly once and for all where the Canadian government stands on Israel, the Canadian conducted an investigation in which they accept the Israeli explanation and said in a press statement: *“Appropriate portions of the final report have been severed out, in accordance with Access to Information regulations to protect the operational security of the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) and the UN”* Half an hour before the fatal bomb was dropped, a United Nations Commander yelled over a radio hookup at an Israeli official: *“You are killing my people”*.

Hundreds of civilians in Lebanon were killed in this war which drove the Israelis back to ‘their’ country and out of Lebanon for the first time in many years. In particular Palestinian refugee communities, ‘the camps,’ have always been targeted in Israeli attacks. One in South Lebanon was destroyed. Leila Kalil, living in Jordan now, told us that the camps are the repository of memory and history for Palestinian exiles; they are the centres of resistance; that is why

the Israelis try so hard to destroy them.

This is one of many works by Brazilian cartoonist, Carlos Latuff. He has received threats such as that posted on: www.likudnik.co.il saying, *“This Carlos should be ‘taken care of’*



IN LOVING MEMORY OF THE CHILDREN OF THE LEBANESE VILLAGE OF QANA, MURDERED IN AN ISRAELI ATTACK ON 30 JULY, 2006.

long time ago, in some way or another.”

One outstanding example of the preservation of Palestinian culture is the Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation, founded by the widow and friends of the well-known writer, two years after his assassination by car bomb in Beirut in 1972. We visited beautifully designed and equipped art kindergartens where children from the camps are trained by art teachers as they are taught the history of their homeland, Palestine.



Their art is published in *Like Roses in the Wind*, an amazing collection of talent and passion by 4-6 year olds and a few older special children, 4th generation refugees from the Nakba, coordinated by Laila Ghassan Kanafani.

We were fortunate to meet Anni Kanafani, Ghassan’s widow and driving force behind the foundation. Her office is decorated with beautiful children’s art. We exchanged news of our mutual friend Erik, a Danish poet. Ghassan gave his niece Lamis, a book every birthday. She died with him in the car when it was bombed. Anni gave me a copy of *The Little Lantern*, a charming story about a princess who learns the power of love and trust, written in English and Arabic and illustrated by Kanafani. He was originally an art teacher before he became a prolific journalist and author of 18 books by the time



he was 36 years old, at the end of his life.

Visiting people, homes and public places in the three camps in Beirut, reminded us how much children are loved and cared for, in the community, in their homes and in the different schools we were welcomed into. Education is extremely important in this culture. Kindergartens are well-equipped with small classes and dedicated teachers.

At the Shatila (also spelled Chatila) camp in southern Beirut, we were taken to the graves and memorial to those who were slaughtered, September 16-18, 1982 by Phalangist forces fighting for Israel who invaded Sabra and Shatila camps; Palestinians claim that 3,000 to 3,500 were killed, many civilians as well as foreign nationals.



There are now about 12,000 people living in Shatila camp, densely packed into one square kilometre without trees or gardens and with decaying and neglected infrastructure. The children, though healthy and well cared for, seemed so pale – they get very little sunshine in the narrow paths and few open

spaces in the camp.

UNRWA, the UN agency set up to help these refugees in 1949, says it has no funds for infrastructure, to repair gas and water lines. The maze of gas, water and electricity conduits would be a nightmare for a Canadian safety official. But Palestinians as ever are philosophical about their conditions and do the best they can.

Many Palestinians have left Lebanon, as a result of the wars and attacks by Israel, but also because in Lebanon they are second class citizens. There are restrictions on their higher education and employment possibilities. Palestinians cannot work in the civil service or teach at public schools. The Right of Return is the dream of every Palestinian we met, and echoed in the art of refugee children. We were there during the year of the 60th anniversary of the Nakba and the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I repeat: Article 13 states the right of exiles to return to their homeland, yet 6 million Nakba descendents cannot return to their homeland.



In the Beirut camps we were given lovely meals in homes and met whole families who have grown up in this state of suspended citizenship. One host, Mahmoud, unwrapped the frail fabric around the key to his family's home. He said, "*Without a homeland – one has no dignity*" and recalled that his father left Bryya village with his goats, sheep & dog expecting to be only 2 weeks in Lebanon in 1948 but never was allowed to return. Later Tamam showed us the large key one of many replicas that her community had made as a symbol of the 60 years of the Nakba.



We met with Nazwa, a private school teacher who brought out the photo of her home city in Palestine; she keeps it under her pillow to sleep on.

Her husband wants to return to Haifa, find the street he lived on, his family home, and his childhood friend, a Jewish boy; he is sure his friend still lives a few doors away.

One evening we were invited to a chic Beirut coffee house in the company of chicly dressed Lebanese women decked out in metal and glitter; they had little interest in a dowdy Canadian. But one guest did engage me; he had to do most of the talking because he was so deaf he could not hear me over the nearby voices and the roar of traffic. He had two hearing aids, thick glasses and stubs for



fingers. He was Bassam Abu Sharif, a major figure in the PLO, considered a dangerous terrorist in the 60s & 70s. He was later the author of a PLO peace offer which was ignored

by Israel and Washington. He is the author of books about the PLO, the most recent: *Arafat and the Dream of Palestine: An Insider's Account*. Bassam was injured when he opened a letter bomb placed in the memoirs of Che Guevara by Mossad (Israel's secret police) in 1972. I think of his finger stubs hitting keys, hour after hour, day after day as he writes his books.

We saw many instances of foreign aid from EU countries & other wealthy nations; once again we found that no country would aid political action for the rights of refugees and the right of return. But one major aid organization, Norwegian People's Aid, funded by Norway's trade unions, funds political advocacy as well as rehabilitation clinics. One day we went to one of their clinics in the camps and saw all the up-to-date

equipment and skilled workers helping the disabled – many as a result of war injuries when the camps were bombed.



Later we met with Haifa Jammal, Human Rights and Advocacy Program Coordinator for NPA who explained the many programs that NPA works on; rights of refugees within Lebanon and internationally, children's rights and empowerment, and women's rights and violence against women. This is done by working with many international forums and agencies; but also with workshops locally for those most affected and who can benefit from knowledge and human rights advocacy.



While Haifa was out of the office getting me some beautiful posters, I looked out the window at a building with missing walls, beside a pile of rubble. Although international (mostly from other Arab states) aid has rebuilt the main roads, bridges and overpasses destroyed by Israel in 2006, behind the scenes there are still many unrepaired buildings and roads.

We had several meetings with Rula, an executive member of the Lebanon Friends of the Environment. She told us about the cluster bombs Israel had poured down on southern Lebanon in 2006. Although there are many projects to remove these bomblets that look like inviting little toys or pop cans.

Lebanese children and farmers are still dying from these bomblets waiting for a slight disturbance to bring on their detonation on the ground and in vegetation. Those found were made in Israel or the USA.

The Lebanese National Demining Office states that cluster bombs were dropped on about 1,080 locations. When the Israeli military realized defeat was near, they rained even more bombs on Lebanon. During the final 72 hours of the war, Israeli warplanes dropped about 4 million bombs on Lebanese soil. Up to 40 percent of these bombs did not explode on contact with the ground. But they explode on 2nd contact when people trip on them, pick them up or even touch them. They



come in tempting disguises – as drink bottles, toys and even jewellery.

The Friends of the Environment is trying to make the world aware of the ongoing results of this war, three years ago.



Bomb contamination has destroyed water supplies, it prevents farmers from working their land and in many places makes it unsafe for children to go outside or go to school. Israeli bombing also destroyed major oil

depots at ports, creating massive oil spills in the Mediterranean Sea.



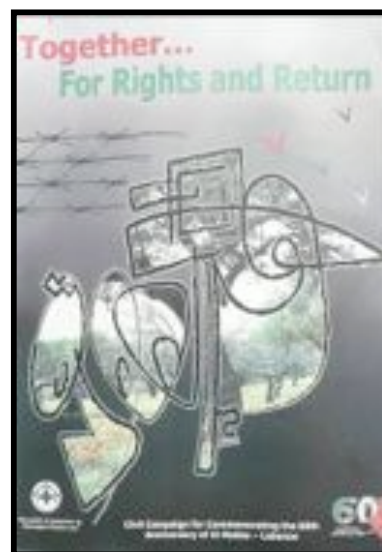
Rula gave us a copy of an excellent power point which details the environmental destruction of this short but devastating war.

Before we caught our plane back to Amman we went to an exhibition of the art of Abdul



Katanani. His art reflects life in the camps where he grew up; collages contain corrugated iron roof fragments, clothing, clothes pins and figures of people in his life.

He created the poster for NPA's support of the Civil Campaign for the 60th Anniversary of the Nakba; Together... for Rights and Return



JORDAN

Back to Jordan, the home of the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature, and home to millions of Palestinians. Amman is a thriving centre of Palestinian culture – the culture of most of its residents. We were taken to a play based on Suad Amiry's satirical book, *Sharon and my mother-in-law*. Hard to imagine a war of occupation being funny, but I read her book later and appreciated her efforts to make humour in the midst of tragedy; yet another example of Palestinian determination to live 'normal lives.'

A beautiful art gallery built on a hillside overlooking Amman with Roman ruins in its garden, Darat al Funun, was the site of *the Return of the Soul: the Nakba Project* by Jane Frere, the only non-Palestinian artist shown.



It is an overwhelming, eerie and disturbing installation of 3000 wax figures suspended by nylon thread from the ceiling, moving constantly as though the souls of the exiled are endlessly on the path of searching. She worked in Jerusalem at the Palestinian Art Court, Alhoash, while she prepared this creation for the 60th commemoration of the Nakba. The installation is accompanied by written stories from oral testimonies by many people about their Nakba experience.

We also saw a powerful work by Mona Hartoun who now lives in Europe – a bed of barbed wire; a coat hanger bent into the



shape of Palestine had a double meaning for me – in Canada a bent coat hanger is a symbol of 'back alley abortion'.

We met a group of ordinary looking middle-aged women for coffee at the gallery. When I learned about them, I found out that these Palestinians and one exiled Iraqi were poets, writers, activists, several had been in jail; all had lost family and friends – one was Lamis Kanafani's best friend, the last to see her before she was blown up with her uncle. Another had survived aerial bombing in Kuwait and one was a famous aeroplane hijacker. Not very ordinary.



Every Palestinian, of the 4 million in Palestine or the 6 million outside has a story of war and loss – and resistance. To all the importance of identity and culture is paramount.

Many Palestinians settled in Jordan after the Nakba in 1948. They were granted full Jordanian citizenship and some sources say they make up the majority of Jordanians. Many live in communities merging into the fabric of local society; others have migrated to Europe, North America and other middle eastern countries.

Camps still exist but seem more like suburbs with their own commerce, apartment blocks, schools etc. We visited Camp Baqa'a, the most populous in Jordan, 300,000 residents.

Our guides, Fayza, a local community activist and businesswoman, & her daughter,

Duaa, a university student, took us to a shop first where we collected groceries and I was given samples of the different blends of Za'atar. After Fayza showed off her handwork.



An organization that provides relief to the disadvantaged took us on its rounds. This included several families with severely handicapped adults, an older man, permanently injured and traumatized by chemical warfare and a Palestinian woman and her children who had fled Iraq, leaving without knowing if her husband in jail there was alive or dead.



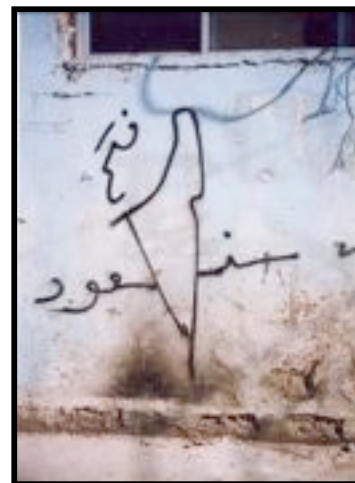
We had a pleasant visit with Amna and her family of 13; children, partners and grandchildren in her bare courtyard; she showed me her equally bare rooms, with just a few beds, tables and cupboards. I admired her hand made dress and she showed off her total collection of four traditional self-made embroidered dresses, representing hundreds of hours of work and great skill. She tried to give me one of them; with much discussion through Duaa, I wore it for this photo and returned it to her. After tea we left and she came after me and thrust 2 beautiful cushions on me, Duaa said I had to take them or I would offend her; I look at those cushions

now and marvel at the incredible generosity of someone who had so little.

But most people in this camp seemed well and the camp looked much better than the Beirut camps, more space, some trees and playgrounds. People maintain their



community groups, replicating towns and villages in their homeland. Lots of shops like this threads shop for embroiderers.



But on the walls in many places the iconic map of Palestine and the words: *We Shall Return*.

Our visit to another camp, Gaza camp – Jarash, was a very different experience meeting refugees from the 1967 war; they had been in Gaza camps since 1948, driven out of their homes, and now were poor and essentially stateless and trapped in terrible conditions with little hope. They cannot travel, they have Palestinian authority documents that have to be renewed regularly, and they can only work locally at casual labour jobs. Jordan did not grant them the same rights as the 1948 & other 1967 refugees. They are the most forgotten of a forgotten people – Palestinian refugees- and are denied not only the right of return but also status and rights within Jordan.



People still live in one story houses or shacks; UNRWA, the UN agency set up for Palestinian refugees in 1949, says they cannot change their homes and that they must retain corrugated iron roofs. We saw many that were full of holes

and leaked in rainy season. Families of eight slept in one windowless room. Many were in urgent need of health care.

Sewage poured out of homes onto alleys and roads. We were accompanied



by local community leaders and an imam, but the police followed us and caught up with us at the UN school – 2 shifts of 600 children each. We were ordered to leave “for our own safety”.



This woman said her husband was very ill & needed surgery but they had no money to pay for it or current permits to allow them to go to the city – no money for those papers either. We left and I brought back the worst case

of fleas I have ever had. I was still scratching my legs when we got home to Victoria. Those children who sleep on the floor probably always itch.

One day I spoke at the Amman Christian Orthodox co-ed high school (students of high scholastic achievement from all faiths attend what is considered to be the best high school in Amman) to a hall filled with articulate and thoughtful students who asked the best questions I have ever had after a speech.

Many wanted to know why there are so few solidarity activists and governments that support Palestine. I could not answer that.



After that talk friends drove us to the Dead Sea for lunch, an attempted swim (impossible in such high density water) and mud baths. Amid the chatting about our experiences in Palestine and Lebanon, our friends looked across the misty air that clings to the shrinking Dead Sea and said sadly, “that’s our home over there, we wonder if we will ever get to go there.”



We were fortunate to meet Tamam Shammout; she and her late husband Ismail are known throughout Europe and much of the world as the pre-eminent artists of the Nakba. Her studio was filled with canvases and she was preparing for a show in Italy – a country with a strong solidarity movement and many links to Palestine.

Another day we were taken to Widad Kamel Kamar’s home museum of traditional



Palestinian textile and other arts. She is a well-known collector of about 5000 embroidered dresses; she knows the provenance and history of every one and the origin of other clothing, baskets, etc. that she has gathered. *“She was...motivated by the need to salvage and preserve Palestinian culture...she has succeeded in raising the awareness of people around the world to the living profile of this Palestinian and human heritage.”* She has written about her collection and textile history and she has curated exhibitions in many countries. When she offered me a beautiful black and red dress from Ramallah about the same age as me – I was thrilled to receive such a precious memory of Palestine.

One day we had lunch with Salma Jayyusi. She is a distinguished author, academic, editor and translator of Arabic literature, in particular of Palestinian women. She founded PROTA (Project of Translation from Arabic), in 1980 to facilitate the publication of Arabic literature in English and other languages and has edited several significant anthologies. Because of her efforts to preserve and spread her culture and her work for peace in the Middle East she was one of the 1000 women proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

By fortunate chance we were able to see the Palestinian poet, Mourid Barghouti, who lives in exile in Cairo but was visiting his mother in Amman. His moving tribute to his friend and colleague Mahmoud Darwish was published in The Guardian, UK. Although Barghouti’s memoir was printed in English and he has essays published in European journals, his many volumes of poetry remain in Arabic, except for *Midnight and other Poems*, just off the press and I treasure my signed copy he gave me that night. I often read his poem, “It’s Also Fine” at events; it is a brilliant call for activism, gently folded into the meaning of life and death.



Before we left Amman I was invited to speak at a large meeting organized by APN. I spoke on the international solidarity movement for Palestine; the audience needed some reassurance that behind a media blackout, activists around the world from trade unions to church groups were working in their communities for Palestine. I left some printed material for the APN library for further research.



On our last night we were in APN offices (donated space) with a group of enthusiastic volunteers and other visitors reporting on their activities and work. Again, a sad farewell, but with our commitment to return during a spring tree planting.

Our journey, rich in experience and meaning, was only made possible by Razan and all the APN workers, PARC and its workers, many friends and friends of friends. We thank them all for their time, care, patience and hospitality. We will never forget the many people who opened their hearts, minds and homes to us. Shukran to you all from both of us. شكر الالك

That journey through Palestine and with Palestinians was a life-changing experience; my sorha enriched my knowledge and understanding of Palestine; the sarha of my life continues with strengthened resolve for solidarity work.



Conclusions

Our first stop en route home was the UK where I had been invited to speak about Palestine in Reading. The poster publicizing my talk used the expression 'Israeli Apartheid' and an interested group turned out to hear me; I learned that solidarity is well organized in Britain and also more Palestinian fair trade products are available there. But an official from the local government was angered by the use of that word "apartheid" and she made threats about cutting funding to the solidarity centre that hosted me. The director there held her ground & refused to back down.

That word has been a major flash point in Canada also, Zionists hate the comparison with South Africa – but as many people, including Desmond Tutu, have pointed out it is a logical comparison. Palestinians, like South Africans in the townships and Bantustans under the Apartheid regime, must have permits from Israel to travel both within their land and to leave it. They are constantly subjected to harassment and arbitrary restriction at checkpoints within, as they call it, their, 'open air prison.' They can be arrested and jailed without charge; their homes can be invaded; they can be questioned and detained at any time. They have far fewer services and utilities than Israelis; what they do have, they pay more for. Palestinians who actually have Israeli citizenship have fewer rights than other Israelis. Is that not APARTHEID?

The brutal invasion of Gaza after years of blockade wreaked a terrible toll on Gazans, and nothing has changed in the year since. Reconstruction is almost impossible; food and medical supplies are still in



short supply. Travel in and out, by Palestinians and foreigners is strictly controlled. The injured mourn their dead.

Worldwide this attack changed many



people's opinions; the cruelty of the Israeli government could not be denied or hidden. Solidarity movements grew in many countries.

In Israel the peace movement was rekindled as many Israeli could not condone their government's invasion of Gaza. There has also been an increase in activism by people of Jewish ethnicity in Canada and USA; new groups with names like 'Not in my Name' and 'The Independent Jewish Voices of Canada' are becoming active. The latter has a petition against Canadian government efforts to brand criticism of the state of Israel as anti-Semitic: ww.petitiononline.com/sc12ijvc/petition

The International Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign is growing rapidly in response to a call from nearly 200 Palestinian organizations, giving us as individuals and groups everywhere the power to show Israel that the occupation does not pay. The call specified these demands to be met: "Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall; Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194."

Israeli historian Ilan Pappé has called for a cultural boycott of Israel. (Death threats against him and his family have forced him to move to the UK.) Neve Gordon, another Israeli academic, has publicly supported the economic boycott of Israel.

In Canada, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and some provincial branches of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) have voted for BDS and fund awareness programs. Trade unions have the resources to bring major attention to issues with resolutions, lobbying our government and public education. CUPE BC has printed an excellent booklet: **THE WALL MUST FALL**

In September 2009 in a landmark decision, Britain's trade unions voted overwhelmingly to commit to build a mass boycott movement, disinvestment and sanctions on Israel for a negotiated settlement based on justice for Palestinians, at the 2009 Trade Union Congress annual meeting in Liverpool by unions representing 6.5 million workers across the UK. The motion additionally called for the TUC General Council to put pressure on the British government to end all arms trading with Israel and support moves to suspend the EU-Israel trade agreement. Unions are also encouraged to disinvest from



companies which profit from Israel's illegal 42-year occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. Chapters/Indigo (In Canada there is a Starbucks in every Chapters store) There is a continuing country-wide boycott & picket of this large Canadian book chain where

every store has a Starbucks as well (including Victoria) because the owners have a charitable foundation that finances any would-be soldier from anywhere in the world who wants to join the Israeli military. CEO Heather Riesman: phone# 1-866 899-4636

Many provincial liquor agencies are now importing and selling Israeli wines, many from grapes grown on illegally occupied land. Contact: BC Liquor Board CEO Jim Chambers, BC Liquor Board, 2625 Rupert St. Vancouver, V5M 3T5. Ph: 604 252-3000

For a complete list of products and companies to boycott: <http://www.bdsmovement.net/>

DIVESTMENT

This is a particularly effective and important part of our campaign; churches, unions, universities, pension funds and other organization with large investment portfolio sell off their Israeli companies or companies connected to Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine. It is already happening and this strategy was crucial in bringing down South Africa's Apartheid regime.

SANCTIONS

Sanctions are government actions against another government. Our government has participated in sanctions against Iraq & has had to cooperate on some levels with USA sanctions against Cuba. The Mulroney Conservative Government was a world leader in the sanctions against South Africa. With public pressure we can change governments or government policies

Both the present government party & the Liberals have always supported the Government of Israel and have never criticized its occupation of Palestine. Now critics of Israel are being called anti-Semitic by a new group, Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism (CPCCA). It is not an official parliamentary body but is a multi-party, voluntary association of 13 MPs. It is currently holding an inquiry into anti-Semitism although criminal anti-Semitism in Canada has diminished steadily since 2002. This committee really is trying to defend Israel's policies on Palestine & Canada's support for them.

Successive Canadian governments have given Israel preferential trading status under the Canada Israel Free Trade Agreement, an agreement that financially supports the Israeli government's oppressive policies and does not even attempt to distinguish products that are from illegal Israeli settlements. It

was implemented in 1997; see: www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/E/pbg/cf/b239/README.html

Canadians have a massive task of changing our own government, not just our commercial agreements, but our so-called aid. In a story on the Electronic Intifada, Canadian author Yves Engler wrote, "...July 2009, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who has openly called for the expulsion of Palestinian citizens of Israel, commented: "It's hard to find a country friendlier to Israel than Canada these days."

...In June 2008, a Harper government press release announced that "Canada is a strong supporter of Palestinian security system reform, particularly through our \$300 million "aid" contribution to the mission of Lt. General Keith Dayton, the US security coordinator, and to the European Union Police Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support."

Boycotts & divestment are having an effect, Israeli exporters are getting worried. When Israel begins to suffer economically, we will have to see if the USA is willing to increase its massive subsidy to Israel. On the other hand, looking at that elephant in the room of 'peace negotiations' would Israel change its policies if the USA ended that subsidy? In 1967 the USA refused to respond to the Israeli attack on the USS Liberty which killed 34 servicemen and injured 171, including those in life rafts. It is impossible to speculate why the most powerful nation on earth is cowed by one tiny one that it constantly appeases.

The other unmentionable elephant in the room is Israel's nuclear arsenal. Dr. Mordechi Vanunu spent 18 years in jail for revealing to the world that Israel had more than 200 nuclear weapons. The world has never been told who stole hundreds of grams of enriched uranium from the USA or what happened to the cargo of a ship carrying 200 tons of uranium ore in 1968. Ariel Sharon once boasted, "Arabs may have the oil, but we have the matches."

www.washingtonreport.org

While all nuclear weapons are terrible, it is amazing that we are subjected to constant fear mongering about Iraq, North Korea and

now Iran having these weapons, but Israel's arsenal and its nuclear policies are never mentioned.

In spite of the continuing oppression of Palestine, there is great hope for transformation in the world. Latin America from Bolivia to El Salvador has overthrown cruel and military regimes and elitist governments. Nicaragua's UN Ambassador, Miguel d'Escoto is providing inspiring leadership in the General Assembly. And cracks are opening in the mainstream media's support of Israeli policies.

"The unbelievable war crimes that Israel is committing in Gaza...make me ashamed to be a Jew. The servile way in which Canada is supporting the USA position-basically it's all Hamas's fault because of missiles that they throw over in desperation- I think this reluctance of Canada to use its influence makes me ashamed to be a Canadian."
Anton Kuerti, acclaimed Canadian concert pianist. 2009. Quoted in Humanist Perspectives.

In August, 2008, an international group sailed a boat loaded with aid into Gaza, ending a 41 year blockade of its sea access. But by the end of the year, the Israeli navy was attacking later peace boats, damaging the ships and taking passengers to prison. The Free Gaza movement continues to raise awareness, to work for a free Gaza and to organize support for more peace boats to try to enter Gaza. See: www.freegaza.org

Meanwhile across the world solidarity groups continue to act & speak out.



UN FACT FINDING MISSION ON THE GAZA CONFLICT

The release in 2009 of the report of this mission has created an enormous amount of publicity and reaction. Justice Richard Goldstone, a South African Jewish judge, with Christine Chinkin, Professor of International Law at the London School of Economics and Political Science at the University of London; Hina Jilani, Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and former Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders; and retired Colonel Desmond Travers, member of the Board of Directors of the Institute for International Criminal Investigations (IICI) presented a unanimous 575 page document that said both sides had committed war crimes. But the figures for Israeli actions were damning.



Some quotes: *“The mission finds that the conduct of the Israeli armed forces constitute grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention in respect of wilful killings and wilfully causing great suffering to protected persons and as such give rise to individual criminal responsibility,”* the report’s executive summary said. *“It also finds that the direct targeting and arbitrary killing of Palestinian civilians is a violation of the right to life.”* & *“The mission concluded that actions*

amounting to war crimes and possibly, in some respects, crimes against humanity, were committed by the Israel Defense Force (IDF).”

Of particular importance is that Israel refused from the beginning to cooperate with the investigators or allow them to enter Israel. They did enter Gaza from Egypt and were able to see the incredible damage and to speak freely to people there.

Goldstone also recognizes the valuable work that we – social movements and non-government organizations do- and in a statement of rare recognition he said, *“We wish, however, to pay our respect to the many civil society organisations, in Gaza, in the West Bank, in Israel and elsewhere, which – often under difficult and challenging circumstances – continue to play a crucial role in upholding the universal principles of human rights. We would respectfully suggest that this Council should recognize and support these organizations”*

For the full report check this website and many others for summaries & comments. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/specialsession/9/FactFindingMission.htm>

This is a report to be built on and a tool to move our government that claims to be a supporter of human rights and democracy to change. However there is a concerted effort to discredit this report but the USA group ‘Jewish Voice for Peace’ is urging us to sign a support petition: www.SupportGoldstone.org

When I spoke to people on my journey, I was asked: why did I care about Palestine – a place so small and so far from Canada? Did I not have issues closer to home to be concerned with?

I, too, live in an occupied country; Canada is occupied militarily, economically and culturally by the world’s only superpower, USA, the great protector of Israel. Our government collaborates openly and shamelessly with the USA government and corporate interests. Daily, we are losing our independence, our resources, our special social infrastructure, and what little culture we have left. Our foreign policy is a sham: ‘we hold the bully’s coat.’ Many Canadians

like many Israelis and other world citizens oppose what governments do in our name. Justice is indivisible; the forces against us are global; we can succeed if we work together as global justice activists.

What do Palestinians want? I have tried to be faithful to the many people we met; to bring back their words and hopes. I cannot



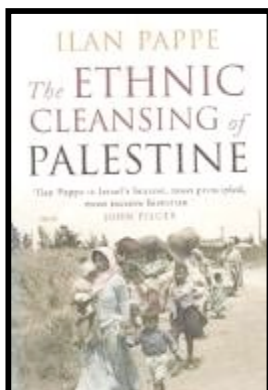
speak for them but I agreed to convey their messages to those who will listen. Simply put, Palestinians want their freedom, justice and dignity; they want

international recognition and enforcement of their rights. They want their country, their land and resources, freedom of movement; an end to the occupation and the reclamation of stolen lands and the removal of the wall and all its apparatus. Palestinians are the indigenous people of the region; like all indigenous people their culture is rooted in their land.

Most Palestinians told us they had Israeli friends and colleagues – indeed there over 1000 organizations in which Israelis and Palestinians work together. As one student told us, *“We have no problem with the Israelis; we can live peacefully with them, if they accept us as equals with equal rights.”*

“Rezeq taught his peers and students that the word Palestine was always something far bigger than Palestine and that being Palestinian was something in the heart and is not simply a matter of birth.” These recent words about a late social leader could apply to many who hold Palestine in their hearts: from the obituary of former Canadian Arab

Federation (CAF) PRESIDENT REZEQ FARAJ published by CAF in October, 2009



For Palestinians the Right of Return is non-negotiable. That is the

ultimate justice. Memory is not enough for anyone, let alone six million people who live daily in the hope of setting foot on Palestinian soil. The enforcement of Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is all it would take. Rights have no meaning if they're not exercised.

Ilan Pappé, the Israeli historian, has stated that there will be no peace in the region until the right of return is respected. *“They want to return while understanding that they will live alongside the Jews. They don't want to expel anyone. What turned me into a great lover of the Palestinians is the will of many among them to share the land with us. Even people in Hamas.”*



Children express this longing in words & art. As one little girl in Lebanon told me, *“Palestine is my home; I want to go there.”*

Let my final words be those of a Palestinian. Let them move and inspire us all to action.

It's Also Fine

By Mourid Barghouti

It's also fine to die in our beds
on a clean pillow
and among our friends.
It's fine to die, once,
our hands crossed on our chests
empty and pale
with no scratches, no chains, no banners,
and no petitions.
It's fine to have an undusty death,
no holes in our shirts,
and no evidence in our ribs.
It's fine to die
with a white pillow, not the pavement, under
our cheeks,
our hands resting in those of our loved ones,
surrounded by desperate doctors and nurses,
with nothing left but a graceful farewell,
paying no attention to history,
leaving this world as it is,
hoping that, someday, someone else
will change it.

(Translated by Mourid Barghouti and Radwa Ashour) from *People In Their Nights* (1999)

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Note: Images of Gaza, maps, cluster bombs & cartoons were found on the internet. Photos of the author by Gerd Weih. All other photos by the author.