

Spring in the countryside.

1st of the Occasional Reports from Angie in the West Bank. March 22, 2004

Tall graceful asphodels, bright red anemones, blue lupins, pale orchids, orange tulips and a myriad of white, yellow, pink and blue ground level flowers adorn the mountainsides here in this rocky, hilly country and the birds are nesting. The olives seem at rest while the almonds are blooming.

My Israeli friends invited me to the Galilee and we shopped in malls for food choosing from long shelves of immense variety, drove to Tiberius to eat by the lakeside, drove to various places to hike from and enjoyed ourselves in this lovely countryside. Cows were wandering in the fields and wheat and barley was long, lush and green. People were walking and driving to and fro and the atmosphere was light. Life was proceeding, with problems no doubt, but of a kind that one could devise a solution to. The threat of suicide bombs¹ though in the background never really intruded on our daily lives here in Israel, except for the constant security checks whenever one entered a public space² and my friends told me of their plans for the future and of their recent 6 month travels in the far-east – they said they seemed to meet Israeli's traveling everywhere they went. The Jewish Festival of Purim was being celebrated and we could hear and see youngsters dressing up and music blaring out of cars passing by. We discussed whether to drive down to the Negev for an outdoor festival and life seemed to be full of choice and hope and normal conversations. My friends are long-standing friends whom I have known for over 20 years, good people who care about others. They hate the occupation, think the settlers should be removed, think the wall an abomination but when

¹ As of 10th March 2004 out of a total of 655 civilians killed, 392 were killed by suicide bombers. The total number of Israelis killed from 29th September 2000 to 10th March 2004 is 931 (276 security forces and 655 civilians). For statistics on killed and wounded on both sides of this conflict you can search the Israeli Defence Forces website and also the website of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society. Upto March 10th 04 they are as follows – number of Israelis killed is 931 and number of Palestinians killed is 2,739; number of Israelis wounded is 6,237 and number of Palestinians wounded is 25,107.

² Bags are searched at the entrances to certain shops and malls, theatres and cinemas.

asked what they are doing about it all reply saying it is all too political for them – their hearts are touched by the humanitarian catastrophe that is the lot of the Palestinians but all they can offer to do is to help buy up a few plastic jerry cans of olive oil from the village that I live in³. Ruth⁴ had helped the previous year with olive picking in the villages in the Salfit⁵ area where I worked, she had brought some of her friends and family, this was something they could do, come and pick olives and try by their presence to lessen some of the settler violence that was preventing the Palestinian farmers from getting onto their land. However, they were scared to become more involved, it might change their lives too much, and the simple human connection in the olive fields might degenerate into awful discussions of the rights and wrongs of past history with their two different narratives and all the recriminations and dreadful animosities of their existential fears would surface and in any case what was the use of demonstrating, they hated the very thought of politics and said they were only interested in doing something if it is purely humanitarian. They offered to drive me into the West Bank right up to the village where I live. Just as well as all Palestinian transport had been cancelled and most of the Palestinian villages and towns were sealed off for Purim – supposedly to still the fears of surprise terrorist attacks – in fact of course, fears are not so easily disposed of. Yacob had not been into the West Bank since the start of this Second Intifada and was feeling fearful as Israeli cars have been stoned and shot at on the settler roads⁶. The village, where I live and work, is right next to one of the major settler roads connecting Tel Aviv to Ariel, the biggest

³ Most villages are now unable to sell the bulk of their oil due to the closures and restrictions on transport and business.

⁴ I have changed the names of all my friends – on both sides of the conflict – to respect and protect them.

⁵ Salfit is known by Palestinians as the green gold area – it is the centre of Palestinian olive oil production. It is also the area known by the Israelis as Samaria. A recent brochure produced by Ariel Settlement describes the area as being in the centre of Israel, the capital of Samaria, and the map on the brochure shows an Israel from the Mediterranean Sea right to the Jordan Valley without any indication of the West Bank and Gaza and the contents do not mention the Palestinian villages or that the settlement was built on the land of these villages that can be seen from the settlement. The pictures show a swimming pool and gardens, well resourced schools and clinics and a university with quick and easy access into Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. A stark contrast to the lives of the Palestinian villagers all around which are not mentioned – it is as if the Palestinians have ‘disappeared’ and do not exist - in this publication at least. The original Hebrew brochure and an alternative one being produced at the moment by the villagers will soon be up on our website at www.womenspeacepalestine.org

⁶ According to IDF statistics 2 Israeli citizens have been killed through rock throwing, and 62 from shootings at an ambush.

settlement⁷ in the West Bank and although they could not drive me into the village due to the large stone and rubble roadblock preventing access they could see the house where I lived from the settler road. My Palestinian friends had delivered the oil and we loaded it into their car and I waved them off on their way to Jerusalem. Ruth to give a seminar for an anthroposophical audience and Yacob to give cranial sacral treatment to those needing it (including some who are settlers in Hebron).

Village life in the West Bank, however, was dominated by the effects of the occupation⁸ - life did not even have a semblance of normality. On the mundane level, our washing machine had ceased to function due to the constant electricity cuts and no-one in the village was really capable of repairing it nor did they have the right parts due to travel restrictions and there was just not time to organise a long and risky roundabout journey over the hills, into a nearby town where maybe someone might have managed to find spare parts. Like most other people in the village I would have to hand-wash my clothes. There was no post either⁹ and I had forgotten to post some letters home to my family in the UK. However, there were more important worries. As usual we were receiving a stream of calls from various villages calling for an international presence in the hope that it might lessen the violence they were experiencing. Soldiers had entered Marda and gassed the children on their way to school and were there in the village with their guns threatening anyone who came out of their houses, would we come? We did and we saw the soldiers still in the village and heard them shooting. The villagers told us that the soldiers had been entering regularly, and that the evening before they

⁷ All the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza are illegal under international law. The 4th Geneva Convention [Article 49 (6)] expressly prohibits an Occupying Power from deporting or transferring parts of its own population into the territory it occupies. In addition, Israeli settlements violate United Nations Security Council Resolutions, including UNSCR 452 (1979) calling upon 'the Government and people of Israel to cease, on an urgent basis, the establishment, construction and planning of settlements in the Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem'. According to references quoted in Passia 2004 there are between 145 and 250 non-military settlements in the West Bank (figures differ because of different definitions and the varying number of the illegal settlements) plus 108 outposts in the West Bank. Jewish settlers comprise around 8% of the total Israeli-Jewish population and around 10% of the total West Bank population.

⁸ The occupation of the West Bank began in June 1967, since when over 50% of the total land area is effectively under the control of settlements. B'Tselem, Land Grab Report, May 2002.

⁹ The Israelis control all movement in and out of the territories and there is no reliable and safe postal service in rural areas.

had desecrated the Mosque by entering it with their shoes on and calling the curfew from the Mosque loudspeakers, and they were painting marks on various buildings marking them for demolition¹⁰. We were shown maps by the villagers that showed that the village would be split in half by the building of the Separation Wall. Then someone from Qarawat Bani Zeid called to say that soldiers had entered the village there yet again and threatened to shoot more people. We were really worried at this as 6 people have been shot dead in this village in the last ten months¹¹. The village were asking for a permanent international presence. We helped arrange for some volunteers to go and stay. But there are just not enough of us. Various grass roots international peace teams are co-operating in providing volunteers for such villages but there are too many villages needing protection and too few volunteers or perhaps to look at it another way there are too many armed soldiers and settlers in the occupied West Bank¹². So, a few days later there was a gap in the rota and the soldiers entered again and this time they took the opportunity to shoot and injure two schoolboys on their way to school¹³. The volunteers, who had left to go and support the nonviolent resistance to the wall in Biddu¹⁴ where 4 villagers had recently been shot, felt terrible. Nothing had happened whilst

¹⁰ See IWPS Incident Report No 84 – Soldiers in Marda. 2nd March 2004. Amnesty International has estimated that around 3,000 houses have been destroyed by the Israeli army during the current intifada. A further 600 plus houses have been demolished for lack of building licenses.

¹¹ IWPS Incident Report No 59 – 2 shot in Qarawat Bani Zeid – October 16th 2003;
IWPS Incident Report No 45 – 1 boy aged 11 years old killed in Qarawat Bani Zeid - May 26th 2003;
IWPS Incident Report No 44 – 2 People Killed in Qarawat Bani Zeid, 1 injured - May 21st 2003;
IWPS Incident Report No 40 – Killing and injuring of students in schoolyard – 24th April 2003;
Qarawat Bani Zeid village under attack.

¹² Israel the 4th largest army in the world and most of the soldiers are in the occupied territories, a tiny area in global terms.

¹³ IWPS Incident Report No 89 – Soldiers open fire on schoolboys wounding 2 – March 9th 2004.

¹⁴ Biddu, Beit Souriq, Qattana, Al Qubeiba, Beit Anan, Beit Lekiya, Beit Duqqu and Beit Ijza villages are situated very close to each other, north of Jerusalem. Altogether, they stand to lose 51,650 dunums of land. They will also be enclosed in their own enclave, or prison, locked in on all sides by the "settler's only" Apartheid Road 443 and totally disconnected from Jerusalem. The villages have been constantly losing land for the past three years, due to settlement expansion. They will also lose all eight water wells which will fall on other side of the wall. The villages have been demonstrating with support from Israeli and international activists since February 19th 2004 when the bulldozers first arrived. Three villagers from Beit Duqqu and Beit Ijza were shot dead by Israeli army snipers on February 25th and a 70 year old villager died from a heart attack after being heavily gassed - the first person to be killed for resisting the Apartheid Wall. A child was seriously wounded by a rubber coated bullet in his chest on the same day. At some of the demonstrations, the people have been able to stop the bulldozers totally, even capturing one in Beit Duqqu for a few hours on March 8th 2004. The residents also filed a petition to the Israeli High Court to stop the Wall and bulldozing was stopped for several days in all but one section of Beit Duqqu which lies in the Ramallah area. Israelis from settlements close by also signed the petition, fearing the barrier will only serve to incite violence from what they describe as their peaceful neighbours.

they had been in the village and they had felt it was probably safe to go to another village.

Soldiers seem to be increasingly active in our area – perhaps because the Wall is approaching fast. A friend of ours who lives right by the roadblock in Hares called us one night because they had heard and seen soldiers creeping through the olive trees and then throwing tear gas outside their house. Talking to others in the village they told us that soldiers had been creeping around several nights that week and they made sure they stayed inside and pulled their curtains closed – they did not want trouble. March 9th we heard that soldiers had been creeping around in Kufr Dik too had then opened fire, damaging several houses and then shooting at a passing car, had shot and wounded a local teacher¹⁵.

The roadblocks and checkpoints have brought most ordinary life to a stop. Many students cannot get to their schools and universities and village life has turned in upon itself. Cultural and social life has been stunted. Women who used to go out in the hills to gather herbs and to picnic have not felt safe enough to do so for over three years now. People attempt to travel mainly for work, school, and medical services – the risks¹⁶ are too great for pleasure alone, even weddings can become a nightmare. I was told of a recent wedding in a village almost entirely enclosed by the Wall where family members in a village next door, only a few minutes away in normal times, took over 6 hours to get to the wedding that had to be delayed because the wall gate had been closed by the Israeli soldiers. The lack of freedom to move around impacts on everything – one cannot get to the public libraries in the cities for instance. Kindly people in other lands try to help as best they can and we recently

¹⁵ IWPS Incident Report No 90 – Soldiers open fire on village, wounding one man and damaging much property – March 9th 2004.

¹⁶ The risks referred to here are:- to be caught in areas that settlers consider to be theirs and thus to risk being beaten, tear-gassed or shot, to be caught by soldiers who may take your ID and put you on a security list and thus you may be harassed again in the future, or to be delayed at a checkpoint so long that you are unable to get home before dark when it is then so unsafe to travel that you will not be able to find transport, or to be caught in a lock-down or curfew and again maybe stranded for days before being able to get home.

received some books kindly donated by a school in the UK¹⁷ (mainly encyclopaedias, reference books and some novels) and whilst discussing where best to locate the books so that villagers would have easy access to them a series of phone calls started to come in to tell of soldiers in Salfit (the regional capital) who had entered the town to arrest some people and shot and wounded several people in the process. A local grocer was shot in the stomach and died a few hours later, the arrested men were released several days later with no charges¹⁸.

As I was writing this I received a phone call with the distressing news of a woman on her way to see her Doctor – she had presented her ID at Huwara checkpoint and the soldiers had suddenly marched off with her. No-one knew what had happened. 6 hours later and we still have not managed to track her down. The human rights organisation that helps track the whereabouts of those detained by the Israeli authorities says it may take 2 or 3 days to find out where she is. She has 4 children between the ages of 2 and 8¹⁹.

But let me not wear you out with all these incidents – they go on and on – this is a land where there is little rule of law – soldiers and settlers are rarely put before the courts to explain their actions and thus more and more abuses are occurring – after a while all of us become used to them. What a terrible thing to admit – that one takes as ‘normal’ these kinds of incidents. Let me get back to the rural agricultural scene that I started with. This is the end of the rains, the time of green so different from the yellows and thorny browns of the summer. The white and pink cyclamen grow in clusters in and around the scattered rocks. The peas and beans are in white scented flower under the olive trees. Farmers need access to their lands at this time and Palestinians want the same as the Israeli farmers or indeed as any farmers anywhere want –

¹⁷ The books had to be air-freighted into Israel to a safe Israeli contact who then kindly brought them in by Israeli number-plated car on the settler road. We then carried the boxes of books up the hill through the olive trees to the house from which we will distribute the books. There are many Jewish Israelis who are part of the peace movement who support Palestinians in ways such as these. They are honoured and respected by the Palestinians who know and care for them.

¹⁸ See IWPS Incident Report No 91 – A private unit of soldiers kill one man and injure 4 – 8th March 2004.

¹⁹ See IWPS Incident Report No 87 – Woman on the way to see the Doctor detained by soldiers at Huwara – 10th March 2004.

to go about their ploughing and planting and weeding, to harvest without fear or hindrance. And to the rural Palestinian communities cut off from any other way of earning their livelihood they depend more than most on access to their land. Hence the terrible anguish of the farmers in this region as the Wall encloses them in their villages and shuts them away from their land.

The Israeli Government had stated that the walls would have wall gates which would be open and that farmers would be able to gain access to their land. However, we talked to farmers at Mas'ha who showed us their permits and explained that even with them they were still being denied entry and exit through the gates and into their fields and groves. We also met with the 3 Mayors of Sanniriya, Azun Atma and Beit Amin, neighbouring villages that share land and whose inhabitants are closely related to each other – they consider themselves as one big family - and now the wall was not only cutting them off from each other but also from their land. They explained a little bit about the problems they faced getting the permits to go through the gates to get to their land. Firstly, each farmer has to go to the local Palestinian municipality to get his registration papers, and then go to the Palestinian Court in Qalqiliya to get a registration from the court and then finally to Kedumin, the Israeli settlement where the land documents are held. Apart from the delays, difficulties and costs involved, once at Kedumin they encounter many problems – firstly they may not be dealt with for hours or even days, due to queues and delays, then when they get to see an official they may discover that the land in question is wanted for Israeli purposes (military needs or for settlement expansion or some other reason) or they may be on a list as a security problem, then again the named landowner may have died and the paper at Kedumin may still be in his name so no one else can claim ownership of this land, or sometimes they are not given any reason whatsoever as to why they cannot get a permit. The person they see at Kedumin just seems to make his own mind up there and then. Only a small proportion of them have managed to get a permit. Also, only one person in a family may manage to get a permit and that is useless as the land needs many of the family members to

work it. And there are many businesses outside the village who buy and sell the produce produced by the farms and who cannot now go and collect the produce from the fields as they cannot get permits. So the farmers are reduced to hauling out their produce on donkeys or on their backs. In some places soldiers have been demanding that donkeys and animals are issued with permits too. One can see the utter frustration and hopelessness in everyone's eyes. Many of the people we meet have resigned themselves to the slow, steady erosion of their basic human rights and to their land, feeling that there is nothing they can do. They keep their heads down and hope against hope that something will save them, that somehow, sometime they will get their land back. Some of these gentle country folk are following the slide towards violence that you find in some of the big cities and then again some have decided to resist non-violently.

Over the last few weeks we have supported several villages which are fighting the wall and the occupation nonviolently and having some success too – the stories from Budrus, Mas'ha, Deir Balut, Biddu are inspiring examples²⁰. Communities not yet affected by the wall are beginning to meet with those villages already affected by the wall and more demonstrations are being planned. Women are meeting in many different places and discussing what they can do as women to resist the occupation. One thing they are sure about is the need to include all women of whatever political faction and to work as women against the wall rather than for narrow political aims. One local women's anti-wall group (which IWPS is regularly supporting) has just held a successful demonstration on the 20th March. By successful I mean that no-one was shot at and the soldiers that prevented the women coming close to the wall at least did not throw tear gas or fire at anyone. Unlike so many of the anti-wall protests occurring up and down the West Bank.

²⁰ IWPS Report No.32 – One month of 24 hour non-violent resistance to Apartheid Wall – 2nd May 2003; IWPS Report No.43 – Palestinian Women Organise against the Apartheid Wall; IWPS Report No.45 – The Rise of the Wall.

Life goes on, we continue to witness and support the resistance to the occupation, and against the wall, to try to build the bridges towards a just and lasting peace. To try to keep hope alive.