

‘ORDINARY PEOPLE - EXTRAORDINARY LIVES’

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The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) is a World Council of Churches project for the protection by presence, the monitoring of human rights, support to Palestinian and Israeli peace activists and for advocacy of an inclusive peace process leading to an end to the occupation in compliance with international humanitarian law.

As Ecumenical Accompaniers (EA) we do not take sides in this conflict and do not discriminate against anyone but we are not neutral in terms of principles of human rights and international humanitarian law. We are committed to the principle and practice of promoting human rights through our work.

How did I come to do this work? – I was born in Germany at the beginning of the 2nd World War and experienced as a child the horrors of war and the collapse of my country. As a young adult I learned about the crimes of the holocaust and became passionate about peacemaking and international relationships. I studied and worked in Berlin during the time of the Berlin Wall and was awarded a Berlin Allied Airlift scholarship to study in the UK. I got married and have been living in England for nearly 40 years, it was here that I joined the Religious Society of Friends and found a spiritual home with Friends. In 2004 I followed a first calling to work as EA in Palestine and Israel; as compass for the journey I chose the values of the Jewish prophetic tradition and the gospel teachings underpinned by international humanitarian law.

Each time I return to the occupied Palestinian territories (oPts) and meet Palestinian people in their homes and places of work I am struck by on the one hand the ordinariness of their lives and on the other hand by the EXTRAORDINARY STORIES they tell of events and experiences that shape their lives lived under nearly 42 years of occupation. Israeli people and we in the UK are protected by civil and humanitarian law, Palestinian people living under military law and control have no such protection.

I would like to introduce to you three people who I met and whose lives speak of the ORDINARY and the EXTRAORDINARY lived in the shadow of the occupation with agricultural gates, checkpoints and settlements, each one is considered an obstacle to peace with Israel in breach of international law.

## SETTLEMENTS

I first met Suzan and her family in their home in the small village of Upper Shufa. Suzan is a wife, mother and homemaker and part of a refugee family from the 1948 Naqba. Lower and Upper Shufa lie in an idyllic hilly landscape with mainly olive groves, the villages are close to the regional town of Tulkarem where our team of EAs was based. A normal and peaceful way of life ended when in 1967 the whole of the West Bank was occupied and a military base and settlement built on village land. The road between Upper and Lower Shufa was blocked with several lines of boulders and earth mounds, the stretch of road leading to upper Shufa was declared open for 'Israeli vehicles only'. Suzan's family with the other residents of the village are only allowed to walk on the road and ride on a donkey; journeys by car to Tulkarem for work, shopping, for school and university and visits to the hospital are only possible along a route that takes longer and is therefore more costly in time and money. The whole of the West Bank now has a dual network of roads, one new and well maintained for Israelis only, the other old, mostly in bad shape and more hazardous. During the three months of our placement we witnessed the effects of criminal behaviour by settlers mostly caused over night, such as damage to the village's water pipes, boulders placed on a track to block the movement by farmers driving their tractor between the fields and home; another time we were called to see 70 young olive trees destroyed and lying broken in the field. We were told of other incidents such as when a deaf person working on his land was shot at and wounded by the military, because he did not follow a soldier's orders.

Israeli settlements are against international law, article 49 of the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention states that 'the occupying power shall not deport or transfer parts of its population into the territory it occupies'. Settlements and their infrastructure are built on 39 % of Palestinian land (UN OCHA report) they impose the fragmentation of the West Bank into 'bantustans'. Settlements are also seen as an obstacle to peace

## CHECKPOINTS

Checkpoints (CPs) are military installations and part of a system of control. During a curfew and temporary checkpoint closure at Beit Iba I met Aala and some of her student friends. It was a Thursday afternoon, the beginning of the Muslim weekend when large numbers of students were on their way home from Nablus university to the surrounding towns and villages. Some 9000 students from Nablus regularly cross one or more CPs between home and university, many experience harassment, physical abuse and detention. At the CP armed soldiers, often as young as the students themselves, ask to see each person's identity card, its number is keyed into a computer to check for any 'security' risk. The whole procedure causes much stress, delays and humiliation; journeys of some 5 miles can take anything between 30 minutes and several hours, and permission to continue the journey can never be taken for granted. Here, as in many other places in the oPts what is a right, is granted as if it were a privilege. During the curfew people were not allowed to move or to have a normal conversation, time became like frozen and a simple gesture considered a potential danger. When Aala intended to open the zip of her handbag to take out a

jumper a student standing next to us considered this as too risky, we stood facing an armed soldier on high alert, his gun lowered. 'Don't' she said to Aala 'he will shoot' and added 'checkpoints give you a feeling that you are occupied in every move you make'.

B'Tselem, an Israeli NGO of human rights lawyers describes checkpoints as 'collective punishment and a form of racial discrimination'. Freedom of movement is part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 13), it is also the prerequisite of other rights such as the right to work and to education. Most CPs control the movement of Palestinians within the oPts and not into Israel, their main function is to protect settlers and their life style 'as if they lived in Israel'.

### AGRICULTURAL GATES

Following the 6<sup>th</sup> day war in 1967 Israel occupied Palestinian land including agricultural land in the Tulkarem area. Farmer Jamal lives in the village of Attil in the West Bank but much of his land and that of his neighbours is now East of the green line and separated from the village by a military fence. He needs to obtain a permit and permission from an Israeli office to access his land through a gate allocated to his village. During last year's olive harvest we were told that out of 1700 permits applied for 600 were rejected or delayed. This system of control can be demoralizing, for many farmers working the land gets harder and a reliable income more precarious. Jamal is a proud owner of a donkey and is usually at the gate before 6 am when a group of soldiers is expected to arrive to open the two fortified barriers of the gate. Farmers are conditioned to follow a rigid procedure of getting in line, moving forward to the first barrier when instructed and waiting before being waved to approach the second barrier where one soldier checks the identity card (ID) and permit, another records the number of the ID, a third soldier watches over the area and a fourth remains close to the jeep. Younger men mainly are asked to open their jackets, to lift up their jumper and turn around in a circle. Following this initial procedure farmers like Jamal return to collect their donkey, the saddle bags are also prodded and checked. It is not uncommon to get upset about one humiliating procedure, only to see a worse one introduced a few weeks later. At Attil gate this meant the installation of a turnstile with red and green lights and a locking mechanism to control the movement of each person who then had to proceed to a cabin door, wait for the green light to open the door and inside be automatically checked with electronic equipment before being allowed to collect the ID, donkey or tractor. A soldier we spoke to on the first day after the introduction of this new procedure said proudly 'we have a new installation...we are getting better' without seeming to realize what it meant to the farmers who had no choice but to comply.

When we next met Jamal he commented: 'I pray every morning that the new equipment does not work...this is our land, the fence and the permits complicate our life'. Close to the gate is a billboard announcing an EU funded project for 'Poverty Alleviation at the Separation Wall Region'. At first reading this sounded friendly, I noticed a number of similar billboards, but on reflection it is part of several EU and US policies which indirectly help to fund the occupation and thus further delay a just political settlement. Jamal's message was: 'we do not wish to live from donations, we need justice and a return of our land...no more permits...no more movement restrictions ...only justice'.

UN Resolution 242 (1967) asks Israel to withdraw from occupied Palestinian land. UDHR (1948) article 1: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and Rights' and article 13 'Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and the right to work'.

Every day I experienced both the ordinary and the extraordinary in the lives of the Palestinian people, people like Suzan, Aala, Jamal and many others. I like to remember their warmth, their hospitality and generosity and the Palestinian 'soumud', their perseverance to continue the caring, to study despite huge obstacles, and to plant new olive trees in place of the broken ones. There were also extraordinary encounters with Israeli and Jewish people such as Machsom Watch Women committed to monitor human rights abuses at Israeli military checkpoints and with Women in Black at their weekly silent vigils in West Jerusalem where each one is holding a poster with the words 'Stop the Occupation' in both Hebrew and English. One of the women in the group is Anna Colomba, a holocaust survivor who was 100 years old this February. There are the extraordinary Palestinian and Israelis who have each lost loved ones on both sides of the conflict and who meet together as 'Family Forum – Parents Circle', they challenge us not just to say 'Shalom' or 'Salaam' but rather 'Enough – to hating and to killing'.

The theme of the present series of lectures at New Jordans is 'Challenges for Our Time' and tonight's presentation referred to 'Building Peace in the Middle East'. Serving as Ecumenical Accompanier and the ongoing advocacy in the UK is one of many examples of peace building in the 'Holy Land', and of course there is much each and any one of us can contribute. You will find a number of suggestions on the sheet compiled by Quaker Peace and Social Witness, QPSW 'What We Can Do' (eappi@quaker.org.uk). My own learning started with listening to people who had served in Palestine before going out myself. The experience has changed my life and I am now part of an interconnected network of people in the UK, in Israel and Palestine who doggedly continue to take one step at a time towards ending the occupation by peaceful means.

'Let us plant dates though those who plant them may never eat them. We must live by the love that we may never see. This is the secret discipline.....'

Ruben Alves, from 'Peacemaking' Pax Christi

