

## Resistance Renewed: Return to Palestine

By Theresa Wolfwood

In April 2010 my partner, Gerd Weih, and I returned to the land of resistance, a country that shrinks every day, getting smaller and smaller as Israelis steal the land of Palestinians. In the process the Israeli government destroys trees, bulldozes homes, levels gardens and fields to rubble, builds more Israeli-only roads, and extends the Apartheid Wall and its barren boundaries. World leaders refuse to act; except for a few, politicians did nothing even when Israel committed piracy and murder on ships in international waters.



Now more than ever, people of conscience, people of good will, people who say they support human rights must support the people of Palestine. One form of support is to visit Palestine, live and meet with Palestinians and learn from them how they survive life under occupation.

### Bil'in: a village, a conference, a model of resistance



Bil'in is a village of 1700 people with houses and fields spilling down a hillside and into a broad valley. The view from our billet is to the west. From the kitchen window I can see more olive groves and fields and a gray band weaving through the green landscape. But since 1967, Bil'in has lost 56% of its land to Israel's illegal occupation. Beyond the village are densely packed modern high rise apartments- colonies built on the land of Bil'in residents. It is those colonies with 45,000 inhabitants that bring my partner Gerd and me to Bil'in. From April 21-23, 2010 we came to attend the 5<sup>th</sup> annual Bil'in International Conference on Palestinian Popular Resistance. Three days of inspiring meetings at the conference strengthened the network of the Palestinian Popular Committees in Non-Violent Resistance – PPCNVR. 19 villages, including Bil'in, a Gaza community and a village in Golan Heights are part of this growing grass roots resistance to the occupation

The colonies are being built by Canadian companies. Quebec's highest court will soon review the case of Bil'in villagers who are trying to sue two Canadian companies — Green Park International Inc. and Green Mountain International — for allegedly violating international law by building condominiums for Israeli settlers in the land of Bil'in. Bil'in's people argue Canadian courts should have jurisdiction on the case because the companies are based in Montreal. Time will tell but Bil'in will not give up & funds are needed for legal expenses.

See: [www.bilin-village.org/english](http://www.bilin-village.org/english) for updates and information on sending donations.



For five years Bil'in has hosted an annual international conference on the resistance.

[www.bilin-village.org](http://www.bilin-village.org) says, "Bil'in is a Palestinian village that is struggling to exist. It is fighting to safeguard its



*land, its olive trees, its resources... its liberty..."*

This was a conference like no other we have attended. After a short van trip from Ramallah with other international visitors we reached the school yard, enclosed by a big marquee – the entry and inside walls were festooned with flags, banners, photographs and beautiful clothing. Delegates were billeted and fed in local homes and local groups made the conference lunches. No global drinks were served. The conference themes were: Non Violence, Creativity, International Joint Struggle. The non-violence is key; these communities in Palestine are committed to non-violent resistance; new ways of resistance are constantly evolving; and Palestine needs us to support its struggle while respecting the priorities of our friends in resistance who daily risk their lives and rights.

More than 250 participants came from 50 countries, although some were prevented by the Iceland volcano clouding European airports and others were prevented by human forces – the Israelis stopped some people from coming. The Gaza delegates spoke to us via video-conferencing. The head of the Bil'in popular committee, Iyad Burnat, and former Vice President of the European Union Parliament Luisa Morgantini, co-chaired the plenary sessions and we also had workshops to discuss and create the conference policy and action statement.

We discussed and strategized the fast growing BDS (Boycott-Divest-Sanctions) Movement. Since 2005 when 180 Palestinian groups called for a Boycott-Divest-Sanctions Movement globally, the BDS campaign has taken off & has had significant successes. The UK Trade Union Congress in 2009 passed a resolution supporting & enacting BDS. Just a few others to mention - Cardiff University in Wales has divested, consumer boycotts are affecting the sale of produce in Europe. In Washington State, USA, solidarity groups have stopped the sale of Israeli products in 2 major chains - Costco & Trader Joe. Norway's pension fund has divested from Israeli companies; activists are stopping Dublin in Ireland from using Viola, the French company building transit systems in Jerusalem. In Sweden there is a campaign against the department store chain H&M - it is building a second outlet in Jerusalem. There is also now a cultural/academic boycott; in UK the Jerusalem String Quartet had its tour disrupted in every city. Classical music not political? Read the CD cover of this group that boasts that 3 members have a violin in one hand & a machine gun in the other.

Iyad Burnat stated that *"Our movement is growing and developing locally and globally. The presence this year of all the Palestinian political factions as well as high level international diplomats at the Bil'in conference on nonviolent popular resistance reflects the growing consensus around the necessity and effectiveness of the nonviolent popular struggle as a way to end Israel's expanding occupation and Apartheid policies."*

During my presentation on behalf of the Canadian delegation – all five of us – young & old from Victoria to Halifax- I told about the Chapters-Indigo bookstore boycott actions, Israeli wines for sale in Canada, Mountain Equipment Coop that sells camping gear made for the Israeli military, our Bil'in support work and Israeli Apartheid week in universities and communities across Canada; recently we have success in curtailing the sales of Ahava cosmetic products here. (photo: author with other country representatives)



For excellent background on this and other related issues see: <http://electronicintifada.net/> . We were also reminded of secondary boycotts - companies that support Israel – Coca-Cola, Starbucks, Este Lauder and many more. Right here and now, Canadians need to act on the investments of the Canada Pension Plan to which we all donate; it invests our money in armament companies that sell arms to Israel. We were urged to keep up the pressure on governments & politicians. Be visible....buttons, bumper stickers, Kaffiehs, bags!

There was a call for more international presence in Palestine – rotating peace teams to observe, record and report on events. Lubna Masara from the Free Gaza Movement also emphasized the need to build solidarity movements within Palestine that include women and youth groups. Another Palestinian reminded us that non-violence is not just a strategy; it is a way of life. We called for international organizations to work on behalf of political prisoners. And we wholeheartedly endorsed forming an international network to support the PPCNVR to communicate the needs and calls from inside and



transform them into global action. (Photo of delegates & action recommendations)



We heard a moving letter from Bil'in organizer, Abdullah Abu Rahmah, one of the organizers of the 5 years of non-violent resistance in Bil'in against the wall and loss of land. December 10, 2010 (Human Rights Day) was the 1st anniversary of Abdullah's imprisonment. He was taken from his bed in the early hours of the morning and has been held ever since in Ofer military prison in Israel – an enclosure of tents with few facilities where prisoners must pay to get food to prepare for themselves. A school teacher and farmer (his family have sold the

farm to support him and themselves) Abdullah's non – violent activism in Bil'in is the sole reason for his arrest. On 10 December 2008, exactly a year before his arrest, Abdullah received the Carl Von Ossietzky Medal for Outstanding Service in the Realization of Basic Human Rights, awarded by the International League for Human Rights in Berlin. On October 11, 2010, Abdullah Abu Rahmah was sentenced to 12 months.

He wrote, *"it is the support that I receive from my family and friends that helps me go on...The relationship we have built together with activists has gone beyond the definition of colleague, we are brothers and visitors in the struggle...From the confines of my imprisonment it becomes so clear that our struggle is far bigger than justice for only Bil'in or even Palestine. We are engaged in an international fight against oppression."* Letter from Ofer Military Detention Camp.

Another Bil'in activist is also in prison. Adeb Abu Rahmah was sentenced to twelve months imprisonment for his involvement in organizing demonstrations. Having served his sentence in full, Abu Rahmah, who was arrested on July 10th, 2009, was supposed to be released immediately according to the decision. The prosecution, which hoped for an even harsher sentence, filed an appeal in the Military Court of Appeals, asking that Abu Rahmah remains incarcerated despite having served his sentence. On Nov. 23, 2010 at 2:30 am Israeli forces stormed the village of Bil'in in a night raid. Four soldiers raided the home of Adeb Abu Rahma, and forces arrested Mohammed Adeb Abu Rahma, Adeb's son, who is under 16 years old. Mohammed is Adeb's only son & sole family provider.

Mohammed Khatib came to Canada to speak in public and in court during the hearing on Canadian companies. He had to leave the conference on Friday as he is banned by Israeli law from being there during the weekly demonstration. One of my memories of Bil'in is of Mohammed saying that he could see the sea from a high point near his home; but he can never take his children there to the beach. Then I remembered that for decades, beaches very near townships in South Africa were posted *"Whites Only"*. When I visited those beaches in 2000 I saw families and teenagers of all colours playing together & enjoying the sea. It will happen – it is coming in Palestine.

One evening we met our billet's father-in-law, a dignified farmer, who told us he had lost 70% of his land. He and all his sons have been in prison. More than 600,000 Palestinians, including women and children, have been imprisoned at some time by Israel.

*Photo of our hostess, Ansam, and her 1<sup>st</sup> born, Mohammad*



The conference concluded on Friday morning and we waited by the cemetery for the walk to the wall to begin. The walk happens every week and has grown to regularly include many Israeli & international activists, not just at conference time. Sadly we visited the grave of the beloved local activist, Bassem Ibrahim Abu Rahma (Pheel) who was killed by a tear gas canister on April 17, 2009 while trying to help a wounded Israeli supporter. We met his mother and brother at the gathering. Tragedy befell this family again a few months ago. Bassem's sister, 36-year-old Jawaher Abu Rahmah was killed on the last day of 2010. Jawaher died after inhaling US-made tear-gas fired by Israeli soldiers at the demonstration. *(Photo: Bassem's grave & his brother)*

I was moved by the commitment of so many activists, Palestinian and Israeli, who regularly attend the demonstration in spite of the threatening use of tear gas and possible death and injury by the canisters fired at high speed.

We also met Europeans who have been going to Palestine in solidarity actions for decades, including one German woman in her eighties. When we were there I was warned by Bil'in's Israeli lawyer, Emily Schaeffer, to be careful, as I have lung problems, not to go too near the wall as that new and more toxic forms of tear gas are being used. I did inhale the gas but first aid workers helped immediately and soon we saw the ambulance drive away with an





Israeli severely injured in the head by a tear gas canister. Other injuries were treated on the spot by Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, an independent MP, medical doctor and leading intellectual of Palestine.

He also spoke at the conference, calling for unity in the non-violent struggle. In an article posted on [www.palestinechronicle.com](http://www.palestinechronicle.com), he writes, *“As powerful as it is militarily, Israel has two major weak points. Firstly, it cannot impose political solutions by force of arms on a people determined to sustain a campaign of resistance. This has been amply demonstrated in two full-scale wars against Lebanon and, most recently, in the assault against Gaza. Secondly, the longer the Palestinians have remained steadfast, and the greater the role the demographic factor has come to play in the conflict, the more clearly Israel has emerged as an apartheid system hostile to peace. If the ethnic cleansing of 1948 and the colonialist expansionism describe the circumstances surrounding the birth of the Israeli state, the recent bills regarding the declaration of allegiance to a Jewish state and prohibiting the Palestinian commemoration of the Nakba more explicitly underscore its essential racist character. Ironically, just as Israel has attained the peak in its drive to fragment the Palestinian people... Palestinians have become reunified in their hardship and in the challenges that confront them. Regardless of whether or not they bear Israeli citizenship, or whether they are residents of Jerusalem, the West Bank or Gaza, they all share the plight of being victims of Israel's systematic discrimination and apartheid order. If the only alternative to evading the struggle is to engage in it in order to resolve it, we must affirm that our national liberation movement is still alive. We must affirm, secondly, that political and diplomatic action is a fundamental part of managing the conflict, as opposed to an alternative to it. In fact, we must elevate it to our primary means for exposing the true nature of Israel, isolating it politically and pressing for international*



*sanctions against it... 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.”*



The complete statement of the International Network for Palestinian Resistance may be found at: [www.internationalpopularstruggle.org](http://www.internationalpopularstruggle.org)

## The Disappearing Landscape

Walaja Palestine is a small country; the wall/fence is everywhere, a constant ominous presence, a reminder to



Palestinians of their lost freedom. Although we had seen the wall before and in many places and we had seen the bare concreted land where once trees grew and families worked their farms, this time we actually witnessed the bulldozing and destruction of olive trees, pine forest and garden land. We went to Walaja, just outside Jerusalem. We arrived about 2 pm; since 7 am that day, 50 trees had been uprooted and killed - the bulldozer had torn up the earth to make a broad strip for a fenced road to connect all the colonies ringed around Jerusalem; 67 home demolition orders were served in 2010; they can happen any time without notice & owners then are given a bill for the work. In 1948 Walaja had 19,400 dunums (about 4 dunums to an acre); after this new road is built it will have only 1500 dunums & the road



will completely encircle the village. Walaja has become one of the focuses of resistance in Palestine, along with Bil'in, Ni'lin, and Beit Jala, with weekly anti-wall demonstrations and resisters from abroad joining in solidarity. When the destruction and construction is completed, Walaja will be enclosed by the wall with only one access point, under Israeli complete military control. (photos: Walaja farmer watching destruction of his trees)

I have followed the continuing destruction and resistance through Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh from Bethlehem who has been arrested at Walaja rallies. He says the risk of arrest and injury is something activists are prepared to face. *"In any kind of popular resistance there is a price to be paid and we are willing to pay that price. That price can range from mild harassment, intimidation, tear gas-which we smell of every week at demonstrations, all the way to being shot and killed. That's what happened to my friend Bassam Abu Rahmah in Bil'in who was not doing any more than I do regularly. That's just the risk you take in popular resistance."* He has provided me with updates and photos taken after we were there. Bethlehem and Jerusalem will be ringed by colonies with their own connecting highways, Palestinian villages will be isolated and walled – that's the plan.



### Beit Jala

Not far from Walaja is an old historic community of mixed Christian and Muslim heritage, Beit Jala. A bulldozer came the day we visited & it destroyed the garden & playground beside a home - the owner of it has a demolition order - to again make a new barricaded



Israeli-only road. 35 families have recently lost land to this project. When we tried to get down the road to this destruction site we were blocked by a coil of razor wire. Our young friends tried to pull it away - a jeep load of



soldiers ordered us to stop or they would shoot. After hours of confrontation, at 7 pm the group was ordered to leave at gunpoint & escorted back up the road 500 m. where four Palestinian Authority soldiers had been standing & sitting around all day, eating chick peas & joking while ignoring the nearby confrontation. It is no surprise that many Palestinians consider their government to be willing collaborators. *(Photos at Beit Jala: confrontation at razor wire, Israeli soldiers, the home slated for demolition, the playground or the daycare had just been bulldozed as the new Israeli-only road approached.)*

### Trying to live a 'normal life'



As we journeyed through the West Bank we met with many people and groups. We returned to Jericho to visit friends there. We learned that as Palestinians attempt to live a normal life, working and enjoying family and community, the ability to live within their culture is under constant attack as Palestine suffers the economic and social effect of the occupation. We witnessed some of attempts to obliterate history, culture and the economic livelihood of Palestinians. *(photos: left, at PARC hostel: the iconic map of Palestine will never be obliterated from Palestinian consciousness. Activist Lubna Masarwa reminds me "we cannot live a normal life")*



After Bil'in we stayed with friends in Bethlehem, one of their children lives in nearby Jerusalem, but they can only visit on Easter and Christmas. There had been a large refugee camp near their home in 1948; the only reminder of it is a children's graveyard down the road, now untended and grown over. The families of those children are in exile and cannot visit the graves.





Near Bethlehem is a family farm which the Nassar family, owners for 4 generations, is fighting to keep. They created the Tent of Nations, a gathering place for Palestinians, Israelis and other visitors to work together, have workshops on peace, art and culture for children and adults. The farm is on the only hilltop in the West Bank not occupied by Israeli military or settlers and they want it badly. The family has paid more than \$140,000 in costs for litigation in military courts and the Israeli Supreme Court. More than 250 of their ancient olive trees have been uprooted; a Jewish group in the UK has funded the planting of new trees. For updates and more information see: [www.tentofnations.org/](http://www.tentofnations.org/)  
*(Photos of Nassar's, international activists & their sculpture at Tent of Nations)*



Throughout Palestine we learned that many men are in jail or handicapped or have left the region to seek work elsewhere creating special hardships for women. In Jericho we toured a new factory run by a women's cooperative that is producing couscous for the European market; we sampled lovely Mahjool dates in cold storage. Another women's cooperative was preparing Za'atar for export with the assistance of the Palestine Agricultural Relief



Committee (PARC). Some of products are exported via border cannot hurt these perishable produce to Jordan herbs that are being exported products must go through There is no such thing as Free



these non-perishable food Jordan; long waits at the products but efforts to send have proved futile. Like the to the EU, all Palestinian Israel and Israeli agents. Trade for an occupied

people. *(photos: left, women preparing wheat for couscous; on right, men preparing herbs for shipment to Europe)*

Resistance takes many forms; keeping people and their livelihood alive is an important act of resistance. We have seen how farmers lose land and trees and how many Palestinians, particularly women, have little means of support. Real support and hope are given by groups like the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature (APN), based in Jordan, PARC and the Palestinian Farmers' Union by distributing more than one million new trees, providing training workshops, irrigation and water systems and helping income generating projects as well as providing supplies for home gardens. The material aid is accompanied by a sense of solidarity and the knowledge that their cause and needs are remembered and supported by many outside Palestine.

Our organization, BBCF, has worked with APN since 2007 and it was gratifying to see the fields of new trees, mainly olive, but also dates, almonds and citrus where growing conditions are appropriate. More than one million trees have been destroyed and more than one million have been replanted. A tree costs \$8; we collect the money and names of donors to send to APN. We have thank you cards for trees; they make a great gift. Nothing can replace the centuries old magnificent 'Romans' as old olive trees are called, but new trees bear fruit within three years and provide much needed support for families. In the north part of the West Bank we saw fields of new olive trees, planted as seedlings provided by APN. I had carried donations to fund trees, including some in the name of a dear friend who died in 2010. I was able to spread her ashes around the roots of an olive seedling.



As land is stolen and trees destroyed, every possible scrap of land is reclaimed to start new orchards. *(Photo: planting my friend Berta's ashes on a patch of new APN saplings, self-sown poppies & wheat complete the symbolism of this act.)*

There is also a concerted effort to provide greater food security and self-sufficiency within Palestine. We went to a greenhouse where strawberries are grown for the local market; but Israel is dumping cheaper (undoubtedly subsidized) produce on the Palestinian market.



After meeting with the Farmers' Union in Tulkarm, we were invited to the home of Hosmema where we sipped a cool drink as she made Za'atar for us before our eyes. She is involved in the Rural Women's Development Association which provides income generating work to women struggling to make a living. I use Hosmema's spice mix regularly and think of that hot afternoon sitting on her porch watching her make Za'atar while her friend, Naomi, sat with us. (photos: left, Naomi; right Hosmema)

We saw the crisis in villages that are being squeezed as the same time homes in East Jerusalem are being destroyed. The leaders of Israel have said nothing will stop their expansion of colonies on Palestinian land. The terrible invasion of Gaza also moved many people - in Canada and elsewhere, including Israel; solidarity is growing. Worldwide, Jewish people are joining the movement for Palestine also. We support the brave Israelis who stand with us in solidarity for Palestinians, including Menachim Begin's grandson. The Israeli poet Aharon Shabtai has said that a state which maintains an occupation does not deserve to be invited to any cultural event...and that the occupation is barbaric and anti-cultural. Palestinians cannot enjoy normal culture events and visits while being occupied. The cultural boycott of Israel challenges the bubble of normal involvement in world culture that Israelis enjoy and fund. See: <http://www.pacbi.org/> Another front of the Resistance that we can all support.



Before we left the north part of the West Bank we were taken to a beautiful remote valley near the village of Aloof where animals grazed peacefully. We could see a wide dark band cut through the pasture; the beginning of another section of the wall; a nearby grove of trees hid the military camp of soldiers who threaten anyone who comes near to the construction site. The wall is now 413 km long and it is planned to be 709 km; 85% will be inside the Green Line of 1967. (photo on left)

Earlier that day we walked through the village of Jat near El Baqaa and saw the wall that cuts right through a home and divides villagers from villagers, family from family. (photo on right)

The writing on the Apartheid Wall (a rich source of popular art everywhere) reads: *To exist is to resist; to resist is to exist.*

The seed of justice is like an olive seed; planted and nurtured it will grow big with roots and fruits; with constant action and care our solidarity will grow like an olive tree.



From a poem reprinted in documents of the Bil'n 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference,  
by Suheir Hammad.  
(She also stars in the film, "Salt in the Sea")



*Occupation, curfew, settlements, closed military zone, administrative detention, siege, preventive strike, terrorist infrastructure, transfer. Their war destroys language. Speak genocide with the words of a quiet technician*

*Occupation means that you cannot trust the OPEN SKY, or any open street near to the gates of Sniper tower. It means you cannot trust the future or have faith that the past will always be there.*

*Occupation means you live out your life under military rule, and the constant threat of death, a quick death from a sniper's bullet or a rocket attack from an M16.*

*A crushing, suffocating death, a slow bleeding death in an ambulance stopped for hours at a checkpoint. A dark death at a torture table of an Israeli prison: just a random arbitrary death.*

*A cold calculated death: from a curable disease. A thousand small deaths while you watch your family dying around you.*

*Occupation means that every day you die, and the world watches in silence. As if your death was nothing, as if you were a stone falling in the earth, water falling over water.*

*And if you face all of this death and indifference and keep your humanity, and your love and your dignity and you refuse to surrender to their terror, then you see something of the courage... that is: PALESTINE*

## Hearts

you enter my land break it  
with your cruel machines  
I watch you bring more soldiers  
to guard your destruction  
trucks arrive  
disgorge relentless blocks of concrete  
align them like stones  
in a cemetery  
you add your garden of razor wire  
your trees are  
high electric fences  
your life is steel and cement  
our life greets every dawn  
in fractured villages  
our trees replanted  
as fearful children  
still grow beautiful  
your wall your brutal gift  
spans the world  
our cause grows  
an olive seed  
in the hearts  
of good people.

Take up a hammer and a chisel  
break down the wall in your heart. *Theresa Wolfwood 2010*

## Oh Palestine

everywhere the pale whispers of olive blossoms  
bulldozers gash the innocent earth  
puffs of warm bread and snowy yogurt  
cruel coils of razor wire obstruct  
endless glasses of mint tea  
dragon breath of tear gas  
dark sweetness of cool dates  
sun and sky absorbed in grey gun steel  
a chair waits beside generous roses  
checkpoints in noon heat emanate cold fear  
hear soft laughter savour loving cheeks  
insistent ambulances hurdle past

oh Palestine  
your broken skin exhales the steadfast scent of za'atar  
oh Palestine *Theresa Wolfwood 2010*

**We left Palestine with the words from Bil'in echoing in our hearts: Khalas! We Are Winning!**



## JORDAN: Palestinians in the diaspora

Almost 75% of Jordan's population is Palestinian with little political power in Jordan and no right of return to their homeland. Some people are in constant contact with their families; others, particularly the young we met in camps, feel alienated and estranged.

Through the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature (APN) we made contact with many groups in Jordan. We were invited to speak in high schools and community groups.



*photos: on the left Ruwwad library, Maha & Samar, the director. On right, children & volunteers in Katabi Katabit*

One group we visited several times is the Ruwwad (it means to have an impact) Community project, it is in an unofficial (not UN-recognized) camp in a densely populated poor area where many women live as single parents. There were few facilities; drug abuse and domestic violence are major problems. Ruwwad has an amazing program all funded by one private donor. Over the last few years Ruwwad has provided a clinic, a post office, playgrounds, a library, workshops on legal rights, literacy programs for adults, theatre training, sports for girls & boys, and scholarships which recipients expected to pay back with community service. The creative and vibrant director, Samar says it is "training for transformation". She has been asked to help set up similar projects on this model in Cairo & Lebanon. I participated in a very heated discussion with teens on their chosen topic of the Saturday forum – occupation & boycotts. Many felt it was hopeless but as I and my friend, Maha, talked about South Africa and the successes to date of the BDS campaign they began to see possibilities of participating in social change.

In Baqa'a Camp, a refugee city of 300'00 Palestinians we were taken to the YWCA which operates a kindergarten, catering classes and literacy workshops for women; there is also a successful bakery on the premises where I first tasted the traditional pastry called Makroota. *(Photo: Children in YWCA kindergarten in Baqa'a camp)*



Many refugee children are benefiting from a new volunteer-run library and art centre in their community called "Kitabi Kitabit" or "my book is your book" as most of the books and art materials are donated. We visited one room in a camp full of active children and happy parents. The project is now being copied in Yemen, Palestine, Tunisia & other countries.



There are also Iraqi refugees in Jordan; we met Mohammed Ghani, a famous Iraqi sculptor, who left Iraq in 2003; he has only recently been able to return to his studio which neighbours protected for him. In his 80's now, he has many plans for new public sculpture in his home city of Baghdad. *(photo: in his Amman studio)*

One of my interesting activities was speaking to high school students in many schools across the city. They want to be involved so we talked about boycotts and how they could participate. I usually went with my friend Taghreed, an author of children's books. She encouraged young people to join APN as volunteers, planting trees in Jordan and raising awareness of the need for trees in Palestine. Taghreed also believes that her books and those of another friend, Dana, instil a cultural pride and a sense of history of Palestine before the Nakba. She says this event is important in Palestinian history but there is much more to Palestinian culture than the catastrophe. *(photo: Taghreed & principal of Holy Rosary High School, a nun from Jerusalem whose whole order lives in exile)*





Not long after we left for home, APN held a very successful outdoor concert with more than 5000 in attendance, many from camps and groups whose tickets were sponsored by wealthier residents. But the amazing part was that 100 young volunteers did all the work and organizing of this event.

Not only young people wanted to meet and talk. I was invited to speak to the Jerusalem Forum, a group dedicated to preserving the culture and heritage of Jerusalem; El Kuds as it is known in Arabic. Members were just as heated as young people about trying to boycott effectively, particularly against food products from Israel, when origins are not required to be shown by retailers and the Jordan-Israel Free Trade Agreement makes it difficult to have a public BDS campaign. I met Hazem Zaki Nusseibeh who gave me a copy of his

memoir: Jerusalemites: A Living Memory. It is a fascinating insider's story of the tumultuous events of his home city; now he, like others, lives in exile in Amman.

Another adult group I met were a group of mothers of school children who also wanted to talk about BDS and connecting to life in Palestine. One very strong woman (on right in photo) said she did not have a single USA or Israeli product in her home. Her mother came from Lifta – a village totally depopulated in 1948 Nakba. Her mother has vivid memories of their forced exile; later she made some Lifta Za'atar crackers for me as a going away present – more typical Palestinian generosity.



APN also plants trees in Jordan, usually in refugee camps or poorer parts of the country. Urban and rural school children get together to plant trees and later nearby school children care for them. We visited a new park (formerly a garbage waste land) beside a school (in left photo) in Rusaifah, east of Amman, where there are UNRWA camps (United Nations Relief and Work Agency, set up to assist Palestinian refugees.) Canada used to supply 10% of UNRWA's budget, but it was suddenly axed by our government last year. The camps and schools are crowded and lack infrastructure and many facilities; the UN

says no one wants to contribute to UNRWA anymore.

Rusaifah was built on the tailing dumps of now abandoned phosphate mines. It is a dusty and polluted city so any new parks and trees are welcome. The mine sites were never cleaned up – the government was part owner of these mines. The city park official who took us around showed us a street he had lived on and had it named after the beloved poet, Mahmoud Darwish; we were able to swap lines of favourite poems.



There is a strong Palestinian community in the '48' which is what many Palestinians call what is now Israel. 20% of Israel's population is Palestinian; we met an activist from there who told us about the Apartheid policies within Israel – the Palestinians can only own property and live in certain areas. A fraction of the funds per capita spent on Israelis is available for Palestinian schools, social services etc. He also called on us to work on campaigns to free political prisoners; shortly after that meeting two prominent social activists in Israel were arrested, Ameer Makhoul (in photo) has been forced to accept a plea bargain, saying he was guilty of various crimes so that he could get a lower sentence than if he stood trial for them all – 95-99% of Palestinians are found guilty in Israeli court.





I am sometimes asked about divisions among Palestinians, but as Huwaida Arraf of the Free Gaza Movement says all Palestinians are equal; in Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, West Bank and Gaza and the global Diaspora, Palestinians are all the same; they are together in the struggle as sisters and brothers.

Before we left Amman, APN organized a farewell party for us; it is always sad to leave good friends. Usually I give a



little talk, but this time we were joined by David (in photo), one of the Canadian delegates to Bil'in whom our Amman hosts had welcomed into their home. I asked him to talk about his experiences as an international observer in a village that was being threatened by Israeli colonists who were stealing the Palestinian's homes. While sleeping around a fire in the orchard with Palestinians, they were attacked by colonists who threw buckets of vomit on them. A terrible story that moved our Amman hosts; they were touched that such a young man would come across the world to support the Palestinian struggles. We too were moved by all the commitment we witness when we travel to Palestine and Jordan. A favourite

word of Palestinians is SUMOUD which means steadfast – like an old olive tree - as we must be in our solidarity. So, sad and SUMOUD, we leave with an olive tree in our hearts.

### Resistance is global and fertile!

We arrived in Berlin to hear the terrible news that the Free Gaza Flotilla had been attacked in international waters. We thought immediately of our friend from Victoria, Kevin Neish, and Palestinians Hwaida Arraf and Lubna Masarwa whom we knew from Bil'in. Kevin and Lubna were on the Mavi Marmara when it was attacked and nine civilians were murdered. A clear case of piracy in international waters. Survivors were taken away, many abused and confined, many tortured, particularly the Palestinians. Lubna was under a long period of house arrest after she was released from prison.

We went to a demonstration outside the German Foreign Affairs ministry – a sea of keffiyahs, flags and banners – tightly controlled by belligerent police. When the Flotilla was attacked 2 German MPs were on board. The largest group of the demonstrators were Turkish women who, as they approached the small park, were stopped and searched for weapons by the police. A small group of people stood at the front with handmade signs that read: *Not in Our name: Jewish Voices for Justice & We are the*



*other Jewish voices.* A brave group of Jewish people who do not support the Israeli government policies of occupation and brutality.



My favourite German artist, the pacifist, socialist and feminist Kathe Kollwitz, whose work was banned in the Nazi era, is now remembered in a big bronze statue in a park. I will never forget her inspiring words: *I am in this world to change it.* So are we, I was reminded of this when I spoke to a German women's group about BDS campaign that Palestinians want everyone to join. There is so much that we can do to change the world for justice in our lifetimes.



In Toronto en route home we went to another demonstration against the Flotilla attack, exuberant with supporters from many parts of Toronto's multi-ethnic population. We went to a talk and art exhibition at Beit Zatoun, a Palestinian cultural centre, founded by Robert Moussad who also started Zatoun fair trade olive oil sales in Canada.

(photos: on left: Bil'in delegate Smadar (photo in Bil'in) lives in Toronto – she made the placard for the Toronto demo that BBCF members, Peter & Geza, are admiring)







As I write this I am preparing for Robert Massoud's public event in Victoria which he will visit soon as part of a BC tour. He will talk about the significance of olive oil and fair trade to the larger issue of justice for Palestine. Ramzy Baroud, the founder of [www.palestinechronicle.com](http://www.palestinechronicle.com) and author of several books (see reviews on [www.bbcf.ca](http://www.bbcf.ca)) spoke recently in Victoria. Kevin Neish is organizing a popular campaign to fund and provide a Canada boat on the next Free Gaza Flotilla. (photo: Textile art made by young people at an international workshop at Tent of Nations, Bethlehem at Beit Zatoun, Toronto.)

**The capture of the humanitarian flotilla to Gaza, the ensuing violence & destruction - the Mavi Marmara was totally trashed & wrecked before it was reclaimed by Turkey - the absence of meaningful international government condemnation of Israel's brutality raised the consciousness of millions of people. But solidarity work and political pressure must continue. Another flotilla is planned for 2011. The people of Gaza are still suffering and their voices must be heard. Here is a poem I wrote, based on the story of a little girl in Gaza.**

**We are still here**

Last night we went to the seashore  
My father carried my little brother  
He cries a lot and hardly moves.  
Mother held the baby  
My older brother and I carried blankets  
They aren't heavy, we only have a few.

Nights in Gaza are cold  
We wear all our clothes and snuggle together.  
Our house has no walls or roof  
So we are accustomed now to lie  
under the dark sky.  
When we are hungry mother says  
Count stars and we do until we sleep.

We reached the beach slowly  
The stones hurt my feet because  
my shoes have stone-size holes.  
I don't cry because Mother says  
I am eight now a big girl.  
Little brother cries for all of us.

Father hardly ever talks  
He walks all night holding my sick brother  
This night we wanted to stay awake  
under our blankets we waited  
lying on a patch of pebbles and sand

The sea so quiet we could hear  
The sea so quiet we could hear  
the murmurs of hundreds of people.

We were told ships were coming with medicine  
and cement to rebuild our house.  
We try everyday to pile up broken blocks  
Even I can carry small bits  
But they don't stay together very well  
We waited happy to know help was coming.

Father has a little job in the day  
He used to be a teacher but the school has gone.  
He sells cigarettes beside the road  
I did sleep until my mother shook me.  
The stars had left the sky  
We go home now she said  
The ships won't come they were captured.

We bought a fish from a fisherman  
to cook at home for breakfast  
As the sun came up I stumbled along.  
Father said nothing but I want to say  
Please tell your friends  
We are still here  
in Gaza.

For Arabic translation see: [http://www.bbcf.ca/poetry\\_1.php](http://www.bbcf.ca/poetry_1.php)



**In December, 2010 I was invited to a conference in Algeria on Palestinian Political Prisoners. Among the 600 delegates from 50 countries were many ex-prisoners, families of prisoners, Palestinians from exile and dedicated activists from around the world. I learned a lot and I was heartened by the work of prison activists in the larger context of justice for Palestine. Please see my paper and full report on the conference on [www.bbcf.ca](http://www.bbcf.ca) with photos, stories and the words of prisoners.**

(Photos: left, Samir Asfour of Gaza is searching for his son, Ahmad, in jail in Israel; right: Fatima El Zak and her son Youssef whom she gave birth to in prison in Israel.)



