

A Visit to Ramallah June 6, 2006

To my family and friends,

To get to Ramallah from Jerusalem, one walks to east Jerusalem and down Nablus Road to the bus station. The Palestinian bus station. There is another station, the Central Bus Station in west Jerusalem which has every amenity for the Israeli traveler. This bus station has no amenities at all. Only an open concrete parking lot filled with buses, parked haphazardly, operating without schedules. Buses leave when every seat has been taken.

Our bus eventually fills and we drive through the city of Ar-Ram, now divided right down the middle by the Wall. This is the town where Palestinian, Israeli and international activists held the demonstration I reported on several weeks ago, a peaceable gathering which ended in tear gas and arrests. Our route takes us around the back of the Palestinian part of the town, along circuitous narrow dirt roads past Qualandia checkpoint on our left. The checkpoint is mechanized now, I had been told. There are fewer soldiers needed and more people can be processed through with less potential for dangerous interaction. As I review the address of my appointment, I notice that the back of the weekly tourist magazine, *This Week in Palestine* contains a map marking the roads upon which cars with Palestinian license plates are permitted to travel. The map is redrawn as circumstances require.

The bus arrives at the Ramallah bus station where I climb down and into a hot, busy, crowded, noisy city square. Narrow streets lined with shops, vendors and foot traffic pointed in all directions. Coming from the center of the roundabout was loud music blasting through microphones, and there were young men putting up flags, signs, and other ceremonial trappings.

I walked up a slight hill where I thought it might be a bit quieter so I could review my map and get my bearings. Reaching the top of the hill, I heard the unmistakable sound of rapid gunshots coming closer. Nervously I stopped and looked around to see what other pedestrians were doing. They too had stopped but did not appear fearful, but merely curious. As the gunshots drew closer, I saw a caravan of cars led by several dozen men shooting repeated bursts of automatic rifle fire into the sky. Surrounding them were Fatah police, several vehicles from the Palestinian Authority and many many flags. A news report said that for the past two days Fatah has issued instructions to deploy armed personnel to numerous locations in the West Bank in response to the Hamas men deployed in Gaza in an effort to show Hamas that when it comes to the West Bank, Fatah

holds the upper hand. I followed the caravan down the hill towards the central square where traffic was being re-directed to allow them to gather for the ceremonies that were another chapter in the jockeying Hamas and Fatah are currently engaged in.

I bought a stuffed pita from a sidewalk vendor and walked to my first appointment, nearly twenty hot noisy minutes away. Arriving at a large, well-kept building on a side street, I entered the welcomingly cool hallway and climbed up the stairs to my appointment with Susanna, on the staff of PNGO, an umbrella group of NGO's formed in 1993 after Oslo. There are several umbrella NGO groups; Hamas and Fatah each have their own. PNGO incorporates the old communists, the left, trade unions, self-help groups, school, health services, all the groups that struggled since the time of the first intifada with the intention of allowing them to speak in one voice, both locally and internationally.

In this cool spacious office, I began my education about what sorts of projects get funded under occupation. I flipped through the six-inch thick bound book of all known terrorists and terrorist organizations. Underscored in bright orange were the alleged terror groups and individuals operating in Palestine. To receive money, one must sign a document pledging that none of the money will go to terrorists or terror groups.

There is little core funding, money that will allow the infrastructure of PNGO to become stable, pay salaries and create relevant and useful projects. As I listened carefully, I began to understand that between Susanna's carefully chosen words, the opaque language used to write grants for projects needed BECAUSE of the Occupation cannot include the fact of the Occupation. Countries that fund projects have their own agendas, their responsibilities to the fact that tax dollars are being used, so the tendency is to fund projects on gender or education or awareness or human rights.

"We need to get creative," she told me. "To find a way outside the box of state interests."

Recently PNGO developed a project designed to serve disabled children in Abu Dis, the only such program available to these children and their families, she explained. But the program was cut off. Israelis want to cut off Abu Dis, Susanna sighed, so the programs there get cut. Then the money is sent to programs in Ramallah, where they can do no harm, she says with bitterness.

Projects about school children are considered too political for most international funders. And grant-writers cannot say clearly that the problems they are trying to address stems from road closures, the building of the Wall, the confiscation of village land, the psychological terrors of growing up in a war zone.

"Development is a business," she said, impatiently snapping the terrorism book shut. "What ends up happening is that the agendas international funders put forward result in the creation of projects that will get funded, not projects that communities need or want."

Leaving the comfortably cool building, I took a taxi directly to Qualandia checkpoint, having been advised to "walk through" and get a Palestinian bus on the far side to take me back to east Jerusalem.

Alighting from my cab, I saw that the monstrosity of the checkpoint looks very different than it did last August when Women in Black were taken on solidarity tours into the Occupied Territories. Now there are guard towers, electronic surveillance and the same carefully controlled turnstiles that I saw at my Machsom Watch visit in Bethlehem.

Approaching by foot, the traveler enters a cavernous metal building with eight or ten narrow corridors bisecting the space. Not all checkpoints are in use at the same time, so I moved towards a group of people who were standing together in a holding section just in front of the turnstiles which open into an enclosed area with a scanning machine and three soldiers sitting behind bullet proof glass. Before each soldier is a microphone allowing him/her to talk through the glass and a slot in the wall through which papers are either inserted, or simply pressed up against the glass to get approval to pass through. There are red and green lights just above the turnstile allowing one person at a time to enter. Once someone has entered the security area, the turnstile behind him or her locks shut. People wait in the holding areas for as many hours as is required on that day.

When the soldier arrives to begin the process, the first person pushes through the turnstile, then the second enters, caught on both sides until the first person has completed the process of taking off their shoes, sliding their papers through the slot in a wall, answering whatever questions are asked, the answers to which decide if you can place all your belongings through the screening conveyor belt or are to be turned back. Exit is through another electronically controlled turnstile. Once that nearly silent process is completed, the red light over the turnstile changes to green, and the next Palestinian stuck between the iron bars can enter and begin the process.

I entered the building, saw the rows of corridors, none of the turnstiles seemed operative and I saw no soldiers. I approached a nearby group of Palestinians and stood with them for over a half hour as the men visited with what seemed to me surprising good humor. There were warm greetings, animated friendly conversation, eye rolling when an Israeli soldier passed ignoring our presence completely, then a return to companionable time-passing. There was

no one who was old, no one who was sick. Just an ordinary group of men and women waiting to move across their land.

Eventually, soldiers arrived and began, very slowly, to process people one at a time. I took out my passport beginning to grow fearful about the experience of being stuck in the turnstile for too long, when several men turned to me and began to speak in animated voices, pointing to an empty corridor nearby. Finally I understood that they had noticed my American passport and were telling me that I could go in another faster line, the one for internationals and Americans. They smiled, urging me to turn back and re-trace my steps. Thanking them, I guiltily turned to walk to what I had originally thought was an empty corridor, and now saw there was a soldier and a turnstile with a green light over it. Quickly pushing my way through, I took off my shoes, pushed my passport through the slot and waited. Nodding, my passport was returned, my belongings were slid through the conveyor belt, I slid into my sandals, pushed through the second turnstile and walked out into the blazingly hot sun of the checkpoint where cars were backed up, vendors were selling food and drinks, and guard-towers loomed over everything.

Climbing aboard a Palestinian bus, I waited for all the seats to be filled so we could return to east Jerusalem. As I sat in the relative cool of the bus, several of the men who had been in the holding corridor with me entered. They smiled warmly and one said, "good luck."

Their generosity, their friendliness, their humanity in such a inhuman situation made my eyes fill with tears and I hurriedly put on my sunglasses and left them on all the rest of the way back to east Jerusalem.

Salaam/Shalom,

Sandy