

Extract from my Journal kept on the visit of Tor and myself to Israel
(from where we returned on Friday, 24th February, 2006)

Day 1

Arrived 4.30 am Ben Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv, after flying over hundreds of miles of snowy countries bathed in moonlight. The most palatial, clean airport I've ever seen.

A shortish questioning by Israeli security - 'but why were we visiting?'. Tor said it was a good thing they let us through as she'd run out of answers.

Swaying on our feet with fatigue, we were met by the minister of the Church of Scotland in Jerusalem, Clarence Musgrave; the **Rev** Clarence, as he is known. He sped us off along the swish new 3-lane highway to Jerusalem - about 40 minutes. No check-points on this road, which would be at a standstill with traffic by 7 am. He pointed out points of interest in the coming dawn light and we could just make out the City of Jerusalem situated on a steep hilltop ahead.

We asked about the population and how many Christians there are. 'They are leaving in droves'. His congregation is about 35. I asked in my fuddled weary state how long the Christian families had been there, thinking I knew what I meant. Clarence replied that there had been this guy called Jesus 2000 years ago and he had a load of mates. So, he supposed, from then!

With Sue put firmly in her place, we arrived at St. Andrews Church and Hostel after driving up beautiful residential streets and past large public buildings; all built in the beautiful creamy pink limestone of the area and surrounded by evergreen trees and foliage. St Andrews is on a high bluff built on land bought from the Greek Orthodox Church in 1927 and looking across at the walls of the old city, at 6.30 am shining and floating in the early morning light. We were given a room with a bathroom and, after a 3 hour sleep, shower and cup of coffee, we taxi-ed up to the Mount of Olives and the Princess Basma Hospital. Before leaving, we gave Clarence our cheque from Tenandry for £550, which you so generously helped to raise. It was gratefully received and will be distributed to families displaced by the Israelis and needing assistance to travel to hospital for treatment.

Leaving West Jerusalem, with all its shiny newness and thriving prosperity, we were immediately struck by our entry into East Jerusalem with its tightly-packed and shoddy buildings and inhabitants busy shopping for their everyday essentials for existence rather than the bustling luxurious commerce of the West side. This is definitely the Palestinian section. Jews are reluctant to enter; even taxi drivers. We are told not to walk alone here.

On our arrival at the Princess Basma we were greeted with broad smiles and handshakes all round; from the guard at the door (the building has heavy security) to the tiny housekeeper. A special hug from Mrs. Betty Majaj who was absolutely delighted with our cheque for £800. "Oh good!" she said "that will support one child for 10 days!". A sobering thought. On top of their day-to-day maintenance, most need special equipment; wheel chairs, frames and, of course, artificial limbs, which the families have absolutely no hope of ever being able to pay for themselves.

Lunch: unleavened bread, hummus and tomatoes.

A quick tour around to meet some of the staff and children. Then to our room where Betty suggested we snoozed for the rest of the afternoon. Tor sleeps but I am too excited to rest and go off exploring. All is much quieter now as the clinics and treatment end at 2 pm and the ringing chatter and laughter ceases. Just the mothers and ten resident children in their dormitories. I looked for a kettle to make some tea in our small kitchen/sitting room shared between nine staff members and six volunteers. There is none. So I brew tea in a tin pot on the gas stove which smells appalling when lit. "Why no kettle?". "No money", I'm told, "to have one here".

The staff number about 60, 18% of whom are severely disabled themselves; prosthetics technician crippled with polio, several office staff in wheelchairs, head of art in wheelchair, one physiotherapist completely blind, another has lost one eye, several on crutches. All the disabled staff live in the hospital. The 10 resident children, all under 15, stay for a few weeks to a few months. Children with cerebral palsy, birth defects of every kind (through intermarriage within families, from malnutrition, and poor management of labour during birth) and many who are bullet and bomb - damaged.

The unit is always full and has a waiting list. The school takes 480 pupils; 72 deaf, 22 blind, 17 in wheel chairs and all educated together. It is amazing how they responded to us; a smile and a hug returned tenfold. There is a wonderful feeling of working together; Muslim and Christian, young and old, whole and lame, the whole community feels warm and loving and, above all, safe. Outside, the street is thronged with people; cars, buses, the tiny shop next door crammed to the rafters with most basic necessities - apart from chocolate and endless cigarettes.

Supper is hummus, bread and cucumber - oh, and mint tea.

Day 2

6.30am slept fitfully. We are overwhelmed already by the last 24 hours experiences.

It is raining hard. There is incessant traffic in the street.

We were woken by the muezzin call at 5 am. sounding urgent and wistful.

A cock crows.

We are on the Mount of Olives where Jesus was.

Above us the children and their mothers are waking. They will not see their fathers and husbands during their stay. No permits allowed for men to move in or out of the area.

Our room is below ground level. The window opens straight onto a concrete and barbed-wire fenced yard at the back. I am afraid to open the window more than a crack for fear a rat will run straight through down onto my bed. The room we share is very clean, very basic and very poor. We share a bathroom with the other four volunteers.

Breakfast: unleavened bread, hummus, oil, mint and tea.

8 am. I go to the Prosthetics Centre and Tor to the Nursing Department. It costs around £8,000 to produce one limb; a knee joint, lower leg and foot. I help with a seven-year-old boy, Achmid, shot in the spine and paralysed from the chest down. They hope to teach him to walk on crutches, wearing a steel body-brace and leg supports, by swinging his body from side-to-side. He is a typical patient.

12 mid-day. Betty Majaj arrives in the unit suggesting Tor and I "go into Jerusalem, perhaps, this afternoon?". The mothers will be looking after their children in the dormitories in the nursing section. We are more than keen.

So down from the Mount of Olives, through the Valley of Kidron to the Damascus Gate we go on the No.75 Bus - just like that! Pinch myself for the umpteenth time. We are really in Jerusalem. Going through the gate in the walls of the old city, we venture to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre through the narrow steeply paved and stepped streets. Here we knelt together in the crypt cut in the rock of Golgotha before the slab of stone on which it is believed Jesus' body was laid after being taken down from the cross. We were invited by the Greek Orthodox priest to inhale the subtle perfume endlessly arising from a crack in the rock.

Then to St. James' Cathedral in the Armenian sector for a service of prayer and plainsong with about 50 priests and novices. A notice instructed us not to cross our legs or to put hands in pockets. In a congregation of only 4, Tor was admonished as we sat for doing just that. Pouring with icy rain as we left. Pause at a stall for delicious falafel on our way back through the bazaar and bought a kettle for the kitchen. Back on the No.75 bus for supper at 6 pm.:- bread hummus and cucumber. As we settle to

To The
Inferno
Bar & Kitchen
Lead to
hall.
above here

sleep, there came a huge clap of thunder followed by rolling rumbles and a shrieking wind.

Day 3

Awake again to the Muezzin call and the cock crowing. Torrential rain and howling wind and the children crying above us.

Breakfast: unleavened bread - and an egg!

We're in the hydrotherapy pool this morning with the severely disabled. I'm allocated Achmid again. He was paralysed and his playmate (both aged six) was killed a few months ago by Israeli soldiers. They were playing with water pistols in the street outside their homes in the Gaza Strip. He loved the freedom of the pool.

After lunch we are whisked off to visit the St. John Eye Hospital in West Jerusalem. Jackie, the Matron, showed us round and we were given a 'wish list' of some equipment they would like, beginning with instruments costing £125,000.

Many injuries from gunshot, teargas, and steel bullets with rubber surround ('just right for an eye'). Patients are Jews, Muslims and Christians. The Director's office and Jackie's office were furnished with beautiful Persian silk carpets, lovely old furniture and paintings ancient and modern. Each office could have held parties (with dancing) for at least 50 people.

Back on the No.75.

Supper: unleavened bread and tomatoes - by the way, lunch was rice.

Wrote a comment to Princess Basma

Day 4

Friday. So no Muslim school or clinics today. We take 6 of the resident children to the Greek Orthodox church and convent grounds opposite where there are chickens, goats and horses. There is an old garden hammock ^{on} which they enjoy swinging on.

In the afternoon, back to the Damascus Gate to walk the Stations of the Cross with the Franciscan Friars; a Friday afternoon weekly walk. Heavy Israeli security everywhere today. All armed, helicopters overhead. Hamas is sworn in tomorrow.

We visited also the Church of St. Anne where Mary's parents, Anne and Joachim, lived and where Mary was born. Here is the pool of Bethesda where Jesus cured the crippled man. The acoustics in St. Anne's are famous and singing there, a joy.

Back through the bazaar for the bus. Every time we wait at the bus station and are in crowds, I am very nervous. There is palpable tension all the time. We look forward to arriving 'home' to our friends at Princess Basma's and have a lively discussion over supper; politics, fashion, marriage, men, babies and foolish hotheads.

Hummus for supper.

Day 5

age Saturday. School again. Today I explore the school with the deputy headmaster; 480 children up to 15; all very neat, black clothes, clean faces and brushed hair. Their play area is on the roof looking down onto the beastly wall which snakes around the foot of the Mount of Olives. There is also a small football pitch squeezed in between the tall buildings. — *on the Roof !!*

Then to help with remedial therapy. Later, we go to the Garden of Gethsemane with the charming door keeper who offered to escort us. I can't possibly explain all the holy sites in the Holy Land that we visited. They are to be found described far better than I can manage in the guide books. A beautiful day and a beautiful place.

Evening & next morning bus to

We decide at about 3 pm. to go off on the No.75, changing onto No.124 bus, into Bethlehem for the night in order to be up early for morning service in the Church of The Nativity. A twenty minute ride from Jerusalem; 3 shekels, about 40 pence.

Everybody out at the security gate in the new-built 8 metre high wall. Overhead cameras, watchtowers, high steel turnstiles, passport and permit control; all very demeaning and intimidating. We jump into a taxi on the other side for the 3-minute ride to a Franciscan hospice in Manger Square where we book in for the night. Comfortable room - with a bath! Potato, cabbage and meat for supper in the refectory. A look around the church; particularly beautiful from the outside. Heavy armed Palestinian security here. We heard later that a cache of missiles which could reach Jerusalem was found that afternoon in Bethlehem and a man killed in the raid.

Day 6

Sunday. 8.30 am. To the Church of The Nativity. A Franciscan devotion to St. Anthony in St. Catherine's adjoining and an Armenian Orthodox service and a Greek Orthodox service all taking place simultaneously. Much raising and lowering of lamps and candle sconces, extinguishing and re-lighting, rolling and unrolling of different floor rugs, removal and replacing of different icons, music, chanting, ringing of bells and small children crawling in and out under the various altars in the church. We took part in an Italian Roman Catholic mass (about 20 participants) in the crypt under the church celebrated by a young Ghanaian priest to whom we spoke afterwards.

Back by taxi to the wall. Much nastier this time. We evidently walked in the wrong direction after the first big steel turnstile and were hailed by megaphone from the watchtower above telling us to turn back. Another turnstile. Electronic airport-style x-rays of our bags and ourselves. Another turnstile. In front of us a family at the permit desk; the blind, elderly man with his wife allowed through but their daughter and grandson were not. Communication with them was by megaphone from somewhere high on the gantry above us. A 3-way argument ensued. Israeli soldiers hustled us all. Another had his gun pointing at us from above. Eventually, Tor and I are waved through leaving the desperate dispute behind us.

Day 7

Our familiar awakening. Today, dressing as inconspicuously as possible (in grey and black) we are taken as guests of one of the nurses to her home in Ramallah. Two buses to the check-point. Massive earth-moving equipment, bulldozing going on as we weave our way off the bus with the others through Security, past up-rooted olive trees and rubble. Another beastly experience. Then, two more buses into Ramallah where we go with Munera to her home in the Camp (Ghetto is the word that springs to mind).

All her neighbours very friendly. We are entertained everywhere with endless tea and sweet sticky cakes. On to shop for lunch. A mass of humanity, fruit, veg, meat, live rabbits and birds, expensive-looking jewellers, cars, buses, lorries hooting, smells, dirt, fumes and down-trodden atmosphere. On to Munera's mother's house where we have our bread and falafal lunch - and more cakes.

We say good-bye and Tor and I retrace our steps past the Palestinian Authority's headquarters where Arafat was held captive. On our way back to Jerusalem, our bus is stopped and boarded and we are checked again by armed security.

To Betty Majaj for tea in her apartment near the Damascus Gate. We are obliged to sample four more cakes! We talked of her Jordanian up-bringing and of her marriage to her Palestinian husband, a paediatric surgeon and Minister of Health. He is now dead but she continues as Director of the Princess

Basma in her eighties. Funding is spasmodic and getting more so. She has already had intimation that money channelled through for the Palestinians from Israeli control may be withdrawn. Every department is crying out for support. Bible Lands (UK) is their most steady helper.

In the evening, we are collected by a young diplomat friend of my daughter's who works in the International Development Fund in Jerusalem. Delicious dinner in an East Jerusalem restaurant. Diving through a hole in a wall to a warm open fire, wine and music. Mark is diplomatic but gloomy as to the situation.

Day 8

For the last time we hear the muezzin call and the crowing cock.

Reluctantly we have to leave our new friends, Muslim and Christian, at the Centre. Farewell to the children. Farewell to Achmid pulling himself along the floor to breakfast (his mother puts him into his cumbersome body cage and steel leg support afterwards). Farewell to Betty Majaj leaving her tiny office and dashing off to a conference in the city. Farewell to our little housekeeper, our door guard and other friends. Farewell to Princess Basma.

Jesus is there.

After settling in to St. Andrews Hostel, where we were given a suite with a balcony looking across to the old city surrounded by trees and gardens (not the high walls and barbed wire of Princess Basma), we walked into Old Jerusalem to the Dome of The Rock. Just able to go to the Wailing Wall and walk around the area after more very tight security checks. This is where Sharon decided to visit, taking with him a thousand Israeli Police guards, and so began a terrible massacre.

Our favourite refreshments; freshly squeezed orange or grapefruit juice sitting in the sun in the Armenian Quarter. Then to the Garden Tomb, just outwith the wall. Here we entered the rock-carved tomb believed to be where Jesus was laid. Peaceful and quiet behind the main bus station wall.

In the evening, walked to the Jerusalem Music Centre to hear an Israeli quartet playing Haydn, Bartok and Beethoven. Another world from the one we left this morning on the Mount of Olives.

Day 9

Enjoyed the garden at the Hostel. Lunch at the Cinematique where a cosmopolitan choice of films is offered and where there is a terrace looking across to the old wall and rosemary-covered slopes.

At 1 pm. were collected by Clarence and his wife, Joan, and driven to John The Baptist's birthplace and to a peaceful old monastery to collect Chris Morgan, the Bishop of Colchester. In this illustrious company (the Church of Scotland Minister and the Bishop) we sped down the road to Jericho. Still more check-points at one of which was a 2-hour traffic jam at the exit. The huge Jewish settlements of the West Bank as we drove out of Jerusalem dominate the rocky hills. They are linked by new roads and infrastructure and threaten to cover the whole area for many miles outwards. We passed nomadic Bedouin caring for their flocks of sheep and goats, their tented camps on the slopes. Children, camels, small villages, some now encircled by the 8-metre high wall and watchtowers and controlled so that the village people have to travel many miles around on main roads to reach their homes.

To the tree in Jericho where the tax-collector, Zacheaus, climbed to see Jesus. The Jericho area is hot, its oasis rich with fruit but dilapidated and forlorn near the shores of the Dead Sea.

To a concert in St. Andrews Church in the evening; viola da gamba and harpsichord played by two young Jewish musicians.

Day 10

Off at 7am. with the Musgraves and the Bishop to the Sea of Galilee. More road checks. More settlements. More prosperity in the Jewish-controlled areas. More poverty in the Arab areas.

The Musgraves tell us their stories of Palestinian families whose homes are entered in the night by the Israeli Army; maybe because they do not possess the correct permits which are unobtainable by many. They are pulled from their beds, sometimes by dogs, and dumped over the wall with nothing. Occasionally, a tent is provided but no possessions, not even essential medicines, baby's nappies etc.. Farmers are not allowed through the check-points to their land for weeks at a time so their crops perish. Water is plentiful for the Jewish population in town and country but in desperate supply for the Arabs. Electricity is cut unexpectedly. Homes searched. Adults and children fired at with tear gas. There are villages where some gases have caused abortions and deformities - and so on and so on

Breakfast in Tiberias on the shores of Lake Galilee at the brand-new Church of Scotland Hostel. Extremely luxurious grounds, swimming pool and every facility of a luxury hotel. Breakfast on the terrace provided for us all as Clarence's guests. A choice of many fruits, several yoghurts, 6 or 7 different breads, 5 or 6 fish dishes, a dozen or more cheeses, eggs, bacon, mushrooms cooked any way you liked, butter, jam, honeys, cakes, puddings, pastries, creamy chocolate, olives, cooked meats, hummus, salads, various teas, coffees and juices. Quite a change from our unleavened bread, hummus and mint tea fare at Princess Basma. We look across to Jordan and the Golan Heights.

To the various religious sites around the lake, particularly to Capernaum where Jesus stayed with Peter's mother-in-law, whose house we could see under the glass floor of the new church there (next to the remains of the synagogue). Also to the site of the feeding of the 5,000, to Mary Magdalene's village, to the Mount of the Ascension; everywhere churches and tourist attractions. A new Jesus theme park is planned! However, we read the bible quietly in turns in the garden and had time to reflect on Jesus' life.

Back to the traffic and checks; a two-and-a-half hours drive back to Jerusalem and so to bed for 4 hours before our 1.30 am call for Tel Aviv Airport and our plane home.