

Harvest 2014 media links

<https://danieleasterman.creatavist.com/troubled-land-feature>

<http://www.fionadunlop.com/blog/2014/11/02/the-survival-of-the-palestinian-olive/>

Olive harvest 2014 reflections

The two weeks I spent in Palestine taught me so much. It is hard to really appreciate how oppressive the presence of the settlements (Yitzhar and Bracha are the closest to the villages) are until you spend time with the communities of Burin and Madama. You start to realise the myriad of ways that their dominance and the military presence effects everyday life in the villages; from restricted access to olive groves, military checkpoints that spring up with no warning, soldiers coming into the village at night, the intimidation of having your house searched at night by soldiers, as well as and the constant knowledge that the villages are being watched by the settlements above. It was particularly noticeable in the children of the families we picked olives with, who are often assigned the task of being on the look-out for settlers or army whilst we pick. The threat of violence or from the settlers or interference from the Israeli military is a real and constant threat.

One day during our first week in Burin, we were picking with a family in their groves up on the hillside overlooking the village and near the settler road leading up to Yitzhar. A military watch tower had recently been established just a few hundred metres from where we were picking. As the afternoon wore on, we noticed military jeeps arriving at the watch tower, and over the course of the afternoon about eleven Israeli soldiers with full combat gear and weapons, came through the olive grove we were picking in. It appeared they were conducting some kind of training or surveillance exercise, and although they did not prevent the family from picking on this occasion, the tension and fear among our group was palpable. The young men in the family kept out of sight to avoid drawing attention to themselves and the children were visibly distressed.

We heard accounts from so many farmers about their trees being damaged by settlers coming down from Yitzhar and Bracha, which loom imposingly on the hilltops above the villages. Some farmers showed us trees where the oldest and strongest branches producing the most fruit are hacked off by the settlers, while other trees are burnt altogether. It can take 15 years for a tree to mature and bear fruit, requiring great care from the farmers to maintain their trees. One farmer described the day he went to his land which has been in his family for generations, and saw more than 100 of his trees damaged. He said "I sat down and wept. These trees are like my children". The devastation clearly still haunted him, and all the farmers told us that all they wanted was to be able to access their land freely and guarantee the safety of their valuable olive trees in order to support their families.

Despite having worries about participating in the harvest this year following the devastation in Gaza over the summer, I felt it was even more important than ever

that I see first-hand what living under occupation really means for Palestinians in the West Bank. The UN General Assembly proclaimed 2014 International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People (<http://www.un.org/en/events/palestineyear/>) and I hoped that by taking part, I would make some contribution, however small, towards this. The incredible hospitality and friendship we experienced was humbling and the great humour, spirit and strength of the families we met was a truly inspiring.

Harvester reflections

Overall I really enjoyed the harvest. It was good to be involved with a solution based approach, that enabled Palestinian workers to create a future for themselves. I loved meeting the farmers, eating the food, getting an understanding of Palestinian culture, and also getting to know the other pickers. I found the trip very enlightening - shifting the situation to me from almost an argument, to a real daily struggle.

After the last attack on Gaza, I felt completely useless - it was then that I decided to start selling Zaytoun Olive Oil. I felt the need to do something tangible, that would improve at least one Palestinian life. I believe in enabling workers to earn their own living and gain a sense of pride out of their trade, so Zaytoun ticked all the boxes. One of the things that I have found since I started selling the olive oil is that it is also a really good way of keeping the situation fresh in the people's minds.

Jack Segal

I came across the whole issue because Zaytoun commissioned SustainAbility, the Forum theatre company I belonged to in Reading, to put on a short play about the plight of the Palestinian olive grower at the last WOMAD festival held in Reading. Doing the research for this led me to feel I wanted to go to the olive groves myself as an International to support the farmers. This was in 2006. I finally made it in 2013!

Ben Gurion airport not a problem. I have met the other members of the group - most of whom I met last year, and we have some great new members.

Jerusalem is very crowded and busy.

We now know that the situation in the villages is very difficult as regards access because of checkpoints, and I am just hoping very much that we'll be able to have access to the olive groves and support the farmers. We leave Jerusalem in less than 4 hours.

Mary Saunders

This is my fourth year of the harvest. The first year I was very nervous - the grilling at the airport, arriving at Damascus Gate late at night and then the bus journey to our very basic accommodation at Madema - I had been warned but I was still a bit shocked! Then the openness and generosity of the families we picked with and the laughter despite the loss most people had suffered. I was

much less anxious the next two years and it was such a thrill to be welcomed back. I suppose I assumed people knew we were there to show solidarity but it wasn't until Bassem in Burin asked me 'why do you come?' that I was able to explain that we were independent and paid our own costs so that we could be with them. The next day she said 'I phoned my sister in America and she says thank you'.

This year brings anxieties of course and I haven't been entirely open with my husband and two grown-up sons who would rather I stayed at home this year. When I heard the news of the shooting of a Burin man by the IDF at a flying roadblock thought it best not to worry them with that information. This makes me wonder if we will even get into Burin this year. I'm sure a way will be found.

Jenny Kelly

I am actually in Jerusalem already as my husband and I have been volunteering at the Cathedral for some time. This is my third Olive harvest, but I have to admit to being more anxious this time. The villages to which we are going have had dreadful incursions from settlers and the IDF over the last 6 - 9 months. Houses have been ransacked, children and young people arrested, over 1000 Olive trees destroyed and generally people very traumatised. People ask why go back there now? For me there is one simple answer, I cannot bottle out when things get difficult. If walking alongside Palestinians means anything, it means being alongside them when they most need support and need to know that people actually care. I do not look forward to incursions from settlers and army, because I know that it will make me very angry and the injustice will be right in front of my face. However, we also know that it will be for the farmers and families to deal with them and for us to continue to pick olives and monitor what is happening.

All I hope is that the people in these small, isolated yet very threatened villages will know that some people in the wider world care enough about them to share a couple of weeks to enable them to get their olives picked, hopefully some of their trees pruned and they will be able to obtain some income from the oil and other olive produce. My other great hope is that when we share with people visiting this land and back home in the UK, that they will take seriously what we share about what we have seen and experienced and take their own action to try and bring peace and justice to this land.

Jane Henson
