

### **Protective Presence in Madama and Burin, 2017**

We went for all the right reasons and I am glad we could lend a hand. I am grateful for the learning I gained. However, the personal rewards I received far surpassed my contribution:

I loved the serenity of the olive groves and the physicality of the picking work. My childhood upbringing was in a flat, up on the seventh floor of a housing estate in Madrid. I don't recall having climbed a tree before.

I loved the sound of the olives hitting the tarpaulin; I loved being rained on by olives when I was sitting picking from freshly pruned branches.

I loved our lunches with the farmers, their generosity and the love with which they made our coffee and tea... I could taste it!

I loved the welcome to their homes which allowed us to have a glimpse of their private lives. I loved holding Abed's new born baby. I loved sitting in their courtyard taking in the sun and drinking tea.

I admired Palestinian endurance and resilience. I know that there is a lot written about *samoud* (steadfastness) well, I felt it to be true. Under the harsh occupation, ordinary life survives and thrives. Amid my frantic life, cluttered with unimportant niggles, I felt humbled by the slow, quiet way in which our Palestinian friends get on with ordinary life, resist the occupation and remain defiant.

I know they were grateful for our presence, but I am grateful for the privilege of sharing snippets of their lives. Their humanity reasserted my humanity and warmed my heart.

Mercedes F.

### **Experiencing the harvest in Kufr Qadum, 2017**

The village of Kufr Qadum is dominated by hilltop settlement outposts and housing. Its olive groves look towards the town of Nablus, a mere 16km east. However the circuitous journey there takes 45 minutes (if there are no road blocks) due to military closure of the main road in 2003. Kufr Qadum's agricultural land is now either within the settlement of Kedumim or in Area C, under Israeli control.

Farming access is only by Israeli military permit, often less than one week annually. During our October visit some families had to pick the whole olive crop within 4 days, meaning the two village olive presses worked around the clock. Starting at 7am, we worked until 5pm in the evening, often under the "guard" of the IDF (Israeli military) in land adjacent to outposts - armed settlers just walked into the groves.

We accompanied one family from As Sawiya, bordering the settlement of Rehalim, for three days, working flat out. Children from the settlement upturned sacks of olives, sewage seeped down into the groves and when fires broke out, the Palestinian fire brigade had to ask the IDF for access permission. Settlement security was irked by our presence, on one day calling the IDF to force a large Palestinian family from groves where in fact no permit was required. As Sawiya's groves are separated from the village by a barriered Israeli highway which presents huge dangers to villagers; 6 months earlier the grandmother of the family was seriously injured by an IDF jeep .

The "normalisation" of 50 years of occupation shown in human privation is stark and shocking, a deterioration specially noticeable to me over time spent in Palestine since 1978. The weekly protests

against the road closure in Kufr Qadum clearly demonstrate the power imbalance: ambulances line up, drones fly overhead and the IDF quickly resorts to live ammunition, skunk and tear gas. Injuries, arrests and even deaths affect every family.

Working alongside our hosts on the harvest, whether or not a “protective” presence, allowed us to witness at first hand the oppression, and use this to subsequently testify to others the meaning of the occupation. Conversely, the landscape, ancient olive groves, family meals under the trees, the talk, storytelling, songs, time off school and work made the harvest a Palestinian celebration of life, history and continued presence, shared with us and even with their families in the diaspora by “Skype visits” on mobiles.

Esther H.

### **A Palestinian experience, 2017**

Take a stretch of shoreline viewed from a satellite: what is a mile in length from above becomes far longer if we walk it with a measuring wheel, following its inlets and rocky outcrops. It becomes exponentially larger if we use string to measure the spaces between the stones over that stretch of coastline. The closer we look, the bigger it gets.

What are we left with? The geo-politics are out the window. You can't see the big picture with your nose to the ground. Instead, there is the maddening nature of local politics, the endless jostling of people vying to survive in far more extreme circumstances than you and I have to deal with. And that's only one side of it - never mind the soldiers and the settlers who are just as susceptible to the myriad forces sweeping through the region.

So pick olives. Enjoy the people, who still manage to smile. They are a proud, gentle people in spite of the fist that constantly knocks them down. And get to know the soldiers if you can - it's hard to get things done without their help.

Enjoy entering Tel Aviv airport. Congratulate yourself on the mild criminal activity of spiriting into the country, even though it's like a version of speed dating where they're the only ones who get to ask the questions. Enjoy Jerusalem and the spectacle of the population like pieces of flint trying not to touch off each other, in case the whole damn place should blow. Though you're probably more in danger of getting hit by someone carrying a large crucifix up the Via Dolorosa.

I was lucky enough to go on a day trip with families from Burin into Israel and up the coast through Haifa to the ancient walled city of Acre. Now there's nothing I take more for granted than the choppy waters of the Irish Sea (I've spent half my life under its numbing waves) but to hear the cries of joy from young and old at their first sight of that sparkling blue was both life affirming and heart breaking. It summed up why I was there in the first place; we're all looking for a little happiness but some are denied even that. Again, it's not the big picture of the years of struggle, it's the frown or smile on someone's face.

So go pick olives. And if you're lucky enough to be standing beside the Eastern Mediterranean, forget about satellites, measuring wheels or string - just enjoy the Palestinian families who may be splashing in its waters for the very first time.

Aidan K.

