

Israel and Palestine – A Region Divided by Common Ground

In February of 1998 I was invited by the UN to conduct two GIS software training classes for the Palestinian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC). One of the classes would be in Gaza and the other in Ramallah, the Palestinian capitol in the West Bank. My trip began with a flight to Vienna and then on to Ben Gurion airport located halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. My UN contact, Ms. Giovanna O'Donnell, met me at the airport and soon we were in a taxi on our way to the Ambassador Hotel in East Jerusalem, the Palestinian section of the city. From my hotel balcony I had a beautiful view of the hills surrounding the city. (It should be noted that this was a time when the threat of a war with Iraq was very real and came to fruition a few years later in Operation Iraqi Freedom) The following morning we took a taxi south to the Gaza Strip, making a short stop at an old Trappist monastery in Latroun, famous for its vineyards and fine wines. The old monastery resembled a large Italian estate built from beautiful local yellow sandstone, sitting amid vast fields and orchards. We purchased a couple of bottles of Sauvignon Blanc from the winery since there would be chance to buy any in Gaza. As we drove through many of the small Israeli towns, we saw many soldiers carrying duffel bags and with machine guns slung over their shoulder, waiting for buses to report for duty, in case of possible war with Iraq!



When we reached the Israeli checkpoint on the border with Gaza it was heavily barricaded and fortified with guard towers, high walls, searchlights, and lots of barbed wire! Our passports were checked by several soldiers and permits to enter Gaza were issued, but only after many questions about our purpose for travelling to Gaza. Then, in order to continue our journey we had to unload our luggage and carry it 500 meters through a virtual “no man’s land” to get in another taxi on the other side. Now we were officially in Palestine, and the scene abruptly changed to one of poverty, filth, and crumbling buildings – basically a crowded “refugee camp”. Finally, we arrived at the “Beach Hotel”, a new small hotel where most of the UN staff were staying. In stark contrast to the refugee camp, only a couple of kms away, the hotel was located on a nice beach with beautiful views of the eastern Mediterranean Sea.



View of the Mediterranean Sea from the Beach Hotel



Breakfast room at the Beach Hotel

In the morning I joined Giovanna for a typical Palestinian breakfast of hummus, falafel, warm pita bread, olives and a feta cheese omelet – a delicious combination. Then it was time for the first day of training class at MOPIC headquarters, located across the street from Yasser Arafat’s house, locally known as the “Presidential Palace”. Actually it was a very modest place, with the exception of a large array of satellite dishes and antennas on the roof. Every day the training class began at 9:00am and quit at 3:00pm, with two short breaks for coffee and prayers. After the training class, Frank, a young Norwegian who was assisting the work of the Ministry, invited us to join him for a beer at the “UN Beach Club”. As we entered the austere, military like concrete building we were not prepared for the décor and atmosphere of an old English gentlemen’s club inside. It looked like it had been transported directly from the colonial days in India. Soon a local Arab waiter dressed neatly in a white coat and black tie appeared and informed us that we must become “members” for the week and buy a book of coupons that were required to purchase food and drink. (over the course of the week the club became our second home, a haven of relaxation from the chaos of activity in Gaza) I enjoyed many evenings in the company of the UN staff from Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as we sat around the table with our pints of cold Carlsberg beer discussing the world news, especially the escalation of tensions between the US and Iraq. Bets were being placed daily about the odds of when the US bombing of Iraq would begin. One day I asked the hotel staff if it was possible to send postcards from Gaza, and the response was “not really”, which was to say “you can try but probably with little chance of success”.

On another day I was in the middle of my lecture, just after noon call to prayer, when we heard lots of shouting outside on the street as a large crowd carrying signs, flags, and banners, along with large pictures of Saddam Hussein, marching toward Yasser Arafat’s house. The demonstration was loud but peaceful and only lasted 20 minutes. But I was unclear to any of us whether the demonstration was in favor of the agreement just reached between the UN Secretary General and Saddam, or against the potential US military strike. But class resumed and afterwards I joined my UN colleagues at the club for a delicious dinner of roasted lamb, rice, potatoes, and fresh steamed vegetables as we discussed the latest developments in the situation with Iraq. So went the rest of the week with breakfast by the beach, training class during the day, and evenings with the Norwegians, Aussie’s, and Kiwi’s at the club sharing stories over pints of cold Carlsberg.

The day after the close of my training class, my Palestinian colleague, Naim, invited us to join him for a tour of the Gaza Strip. Our first stop was the busy Friday morning market in the bustling “beach refugee camp”, only a stone’s throw from the luxury of the Beach Hotel. The market had an abundance of appealing fresh fruits and vegetables for sale amidst the chaos of honking car horns, braying donkeys, and shouting voices. Throughout the Gaza Strip buildings looked shabby and run down, the streets dirty and not maintained, and vast amounts of plastic shopping bags that littered the countryside, all of which was in stark contrast to the neat and well-maintained Israeli areas beyond Gaza.



The streets of Gaza

Later Naim took us to the old city where we walked through narrow streets to the historic site of the Church of Saint Porphyrius, built in the 5th century AD and located adjacent to an ancient Mosque. Naim knew the Greek Orthodox Rector who gave us a fascinating tour of the old church. As we entered one of the old wooden side doors we suddenly became aware that we were now standing almost 8 feet above the floor of the ancient church. It was clear that the old city was much lower 1500 years ago. The church was filled with hundreds of gold icon, chalices, and scepters, but the Rector was especially proud of his 150-year-old family bible, all of which was handwritten in Arabic script.



The Church of Saint Porphyrius

Further along the narrow street we came to an old Turkish bath that was at least 1000 years old and still in operation. Even though the sign above the door said it was men's day, Giovanna was also invited to join us on a tour of the historic bath house. So we made our way down a very steep, narrow stone staircase into a large domed room with a beautiful floor of marble and old tile in an intricate design. Our guide told us the fascinating history of the ancient structure as we entered the steam and sauna room, which was very hot indeed, as one would expect. In ancient times it was heated by charcoal and wood fires under the marble floor, but today it's heated by petrol stoves. As we were about to leave we were invited to come back later and partake in a traditional Turkish bath. Upon leaving Giovanna drew quite a few stares from the men on the street!



1000 Year Old Turkish Bath

From the old city Naim drove us along the coastal road where we passed a large area of beautiful new marble villas, some costing well over \$5 million, belonging to many of the Palestinian Ministers. (it's both an embarrassment and travesty when you consider the appalling conditions of the refugee camp only a few miles to the north!) The locals joke about this being the "Minister's refugee camp". As we drove inland we came in sight of tall observation towers, and high steel walls topped with razor sharp barbed wire. These were Israeli "settlements", surrounded by Palestinian villages. It seems that the Israeli "settlers" require a military escort whenever they need to leave their home to travel to Israel. Seeing this, my first thought was of being in a prison! (who in their right mind would choose to live this way?) It's certainly understandable why the Palestinians are very upset by the sight and continued existence of the settlements in a region that's supposed to be Palestine.

After passing through several Israeli military checkpoints we came to a small amusement park on the beach where lots of families were obviously enjoying themselves, the children running up and down the beach playing tag with the waves. At one point on our tour in southern Gaza just a couple of miles from the border with Egypt, the highway bisected a new Israeli settlement, and a high, heavily armored walkway spanned the highway to connect the two halves of the settlement. From the highway, with its 15 foot high steel walls topped with barbed wire, electrified fences, searchlights and guard towers the settlement looked exactly like a "maximum security prison"! (it made me wonder what kind of "quality of life" its Israeli inhabitants must have? But there was no way to know for we were forbidden to enter or even take photos) About a mile further on we came to a large compound with a sign reading "Gaza European Hospital", and as we neared the main gate we could see a huge new modern facility but with no one home, so to speak. The guard at the gate told us the hospital was fully equipped with the latest medical technology, but there was no staff to operate it! (what a tragic waste) As we left the unused facility, a herd of goats and sheep grazed in the fields surrounding it. On the main highway north Naim took a narrow, unpaved road to a large, beautifully manicured cemetery with several hundred graves arranged in long neat rows where Allied soldiers from WWI were buried. It's been maintained by the British government ever since the end of the war. As we walked among the rows of headstones bearing the names and units of those who died in the disastrous assaults against the heavily defended Turkish defenses, we saw two important dates inscribed on most of the headstones when the young men had died – 20th of April, 1920 and 6th of November, 1920.



WWI Cemetery

Ironically, all three faiths were represented among the dead – Christian, Muslim, and Jew. They all fought for the liberation of Palestine from the Ottoman Empire! Following the sobering experience of the cemetery, Naim took us to the new Gaza International Airport, but as we got closer a long convoy of black police vehicles flew by us at high speed. And as we approached the main gate a TV camera crew was busy packing up their gear, so the consensus of our group was that Yasser Arafat had just returned from Geneva. Naim knew the airport manager and arranged for him to give us a tour. As we walked into the main terminal building we saw a beautiful, traditional Arabic geometric design constructed with local yellow sandstone and pink marble from Hebron by a well-known Moroccan architect. We were informed that the airport had a runway 3 km long, capable of landing a 747, but Israel has yet to grant airspace for the airport. However, the airport manager was very proud to show us the control tower which has yet to receive all of the necessary equipment required for landing commercial flights. Meanwhile, the national airline of Palestine has three airplanes ready to fly, all of which were donated by other countries. Interestingly, from the top of the control tower we could see both Israel and Egypt.



The new Gaza International Airport



Entrance to the Gaza International Airport

Leaving the new airport, yet to open for commercial flights, (I could only wish them good luck) we drove north through many small villages and verdant farmlands to Naim's home for a lovely dinner of grilled spiced lamb cooked over an open fire, and a salad of fresh cucumbers, onions, tomatoes, garlic, parsley and lemon. We all sat on a large carpet in the middle of a small olive grove, making fresh sandwiches

with warm pita bread, hummus, and spiced lamb from large bowls in the center. It was so typical of the warm and generous Arabic hospitality I've encountered throughout the Middle East.



Enjoying dinner in the middle of an Olive grove

My evening ended at the UN club with the Norwegians and Aussies, but my day with Naim and his family was the memory I remember most. Such friendly and hospitable people as you'll ever hope to meet, but in one of the most difficult of living situations you may ever encounter. The resilience and optimism of the Palestinian people I met will remain with me long after I leave Palestine. Soon I was on my way to Jerusalem and an encounter with the Holy City. Stay tuned!