

A LITTLE ACCOUNT OF THE TRIP

By Anne-Claire and Tanguy

Here is a very short account of our trip. We gave a summary chronology of it in the introduction. To read the complete logbook, we invite you to visit our site : "Living together in Palestine" : www.taayoush.be

Thursday, April 2, 2009

D-day at last ! We leave Bierset Airport. On the plane, there seem to be only Jewish families, with lots of very young children, all probably on their way to celebrate Pessah in Israel. After a four-and-a-half-hour-long flight, we land in **Tel Aviv** : it's 19 degrees outside and the air is fragrant with the scent of jasmine. Sherouts (taxi-vans) drive us to **Jerusalem**. Night has fallen so we can see nothing of the landscape we are going through. We get off at **Jaffa Gate** inside the wall of the Old Town. Too tired to be aware of where we indeed are (not less than Jerusalem !!!), we busy ourselves with finding the Youth Hostel in which Tanguy has booked rooms for our first 3 nights on the "Wall-y Land". The night will be short : tomorrow at 9 a.m. we have an appointment with Michel Warshawski * will be taking us to the Jewish settlements around Jerusalem... *Leyla saïda* ! Night, night! Sleep tight!...

Friday, April 3, 2009

Breakfast on the roof-terrace of the Youth hostel : unobstructed view guaranteed on **Jerusalem** !...Michel W. has got an unforeseen difficulty and won't be able to show us round the settlements as promised. We are disappointed of course but no fools with our hands : we hire two Palestinian taxi-drivers and ask them to drive us to a place from which we could have an open view of the Old Town... First contact with the wall of separation, first scene at a checkpoint too. We finish this improvised tout at **Bethany**, one of those Palestinian villages that are now trapped between the separating wall and the Old Town. Unlike the Israeli settlements we can see on the tops of the hills, it is dirty, cluttered, overcrowded. Its inhabitants survive in a place that has become little more than an open-air prison which neither they nor their goods can leave. This first day here has been filled with emotions and sensations. We decide to sit down somewhere near the Wailing Wall : sunshine, buzzing of the prayers and discussions, comings and goings of Jewish people from all over the world who have come to celebrate Pessah in Jerusalem... All of a sudden, an Israeli woman calls out to us and tells us things that let us wonder : no peace ever possible with the Palestinians?

Saturday, April 4, 2009

Shabat : everything is closed in the new Jewish part of **Jerusalem**. On the opposite, inside the wall, the souks are already in full swing although it is still very early. Daoud, our 26-year-old "contact" in Jerusalem has come to fetch us : he is taking us to *Nidal Centre*, the socio-cultural centre where we meet some of the

Palestinian children and women he works with. From there, we all go on an "alternative" visit of the old town : much interesting information about the history and the development of the city as well as about what life is like for the Palestinian inhabitants of Jerusalem. Our first confrontation with the Israeli "security system" : Daoud is coldly put in his place. He can't come with us to the Wailing Wall. We don't know it yet but we have witnessed the first of a long list of discriminatory measures the Palestinians are subjected to.

Sunday, April 5, 2009

Today, Daoud is taking us to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Then we all go and visit **Ali Jiddah**, an Afro-Palestinian in his sixties who tells us about his career as a man and as an activist since the occupation of Jerusalem by Israel in 1967. Then we go to **Silwan**, another Palestinian village where a musical entertainment has been organised within the context of a demonstration aiming at drawing people's attention on the lot of the village : 1500 inhabitants are about to be thrown out of their homes because Israel wants to build an amusement park on the place. At the end of the afternoon, a bus leaves us at [Bethlehem checkpoint](#), which we have to go through on foot : waiting, arbitrary verbal aggressions - a painful experience for each of us. Fortunately, on the other side of the wall, **Martine** is waiting for us. We all cram into taxis that drive us to the **refugee camp of Aida** where we are going to stay for ten days. "Our" young Palestinian hosts welcome us in front of *Al-Rowwad* cultural centre : mixed curiosity and shyness for all of us. They help us settle down in the *guest house* where huge pizzas are waiting for us. Then we all go for a short walk up to the wall that borders the camp and the town of **Bethlehem**. "Back home", three of them treat us with an improvised concert of rap-songs... Music, the common language...

Monday, April 6, 2009

Our hosts are early birds! They are already at our door, ready to take us around the camp. Bonds of friendship are being woven nicely : we all speak a broken English that works, we sing together and laugh and won't leave each other for 10 days ! Then, we are shown around the offices and activities of Al-Rowwad : other faces, other smiles... And now, direction **Bethlehem**. Our Muslim friends take us to the Nativity Church, the Milk Grotto and other pilgrimage places for religious tourism... It is really kind of them but actually we are not really eager for it, which sort of surprises them. 3 p.m. : we are back in **Al-Rowwad** where we meet Issa, a man in his thirties who takes on a group of about ten 8-to-12-year-old girls to do some theatre work with them everyday : the aim, he explains to us, is to help the kids to "get out of confinement" by opening the doors to their imaginary world, to their creativity, to dreaming. At night we are back in Bethlehem : "*Kwal*", a French group from Nantes is giving a concert at **Bethlehem Peace Centre** . When it is over, our three singers of the day before ("*The Freedom Sons*"), jump on the stage and, to our amazement, improvise a rap show ! Crazy atmosphere !

Tuesday, April 7, 2009

Today some of us go and attend **Tareq** 's game activity : just like with Issa yesterday, it is real self-construction work for all the children of the camp...

In the afternoon, our hosts (and already friends) invite us to watch short films at the Centre, which **Mourad** (27) has shot about the everyday life of the Palestinians under occupation : lives shattered by decisions that were made far away from them, and far above their heads by foreign people who didn't have the slightest idea about them. When Mourad turns the lights on again, we try to cheer, in spite of the emotion that submerges us in front of all the mess done. We want to cheer for his work, but also for the courage, the simplicity with which these young Palestinians all bare their hearts and life to us. We thank them for their trust in us too.

Wednesday, April 8, 2009

Today is the official start of our "work" here. We have told our friends about our docu-film project about "Palestine as seen by the Palestinians", which we would bring back to Belgium and show to our families and friends. We divide the tasks : while some of us go photo-hunting around the camp, the others meet at the Centre where they interview **Salam** (18) and **Marwa** (23, married, with a little baby-girl) who both lend themselves to the game very kindly and tell us about the situation in Palestine as well as about their dreams. We are all back together at 11, ready for a little trip to **Solomon's Pools** (huge water tanks where, according to the legend, King Salomon liked going for a walk in the tenth century B.C.), a welcomed green space for these people living in a camp all made in concrete and breeze-blocks : chichi, nice little a pic-nic, a long siesta and muffled chatting under the midday sun. Marwa shows us pictures of her little daughter and of her young brother who has been in prison for several months after a slanderous denunciation. In Palestine, melancholy is never far away from joy, and vice versa... But it is already time to go back to **Aïda** and join the theatre workshop : today we are honoured to attend the centre's theatrical company's last rehearsals before they all fly to Austria where they will present their new play. It's both deeply moving and uncomfortable to see these children embody a true story, theirs, their parents' and grand-parents', the story of their people. In the meantime, the other half of the group has gone to attend Youssef's basket-ball match : basket-ball in wheel-chair for this young athlete who got injured in a mortar fire by the Israeli army on the camp. In the afternoon, we all walk down to **Beit Jala**, the neighbouring village that clings to the side of the hill just across the valley then (it has turned into a tradition by now!) spend another quiet evening together with our friends : music, laughter, songs and discussions until late, or rather early in the next day (we have brought guitars, an accordion, Jews' harps and zazous from Belgium). It is so nice to be together, so well together indeed.

Thursday, April 9, 2009

This morning Diane, Laetitia, Théodore, Anne-Claire and Tanguy go back to Al-Rowwad to continue with the interviews. Today it is **Mazen** (19), **Ayssar** (18) and **Youssef's** (23) turn. Just as we did with Salam and Marwa yesterday we ask them to answer our questions in Arabic. Today Oussama (31 years old) will translate into English for us. We are touched by their simplicity and generosity. We are becoming more and more aware of the present all these young Palestinians offer us by talking about themselves the way they do. Aware of our responsibility to "make all this live further". In the meantime Louise, Guirec, Julien and Bénédicte have gone

round the camp again, hunting for more pictures and discover the messages painted here and there by the inhabitants of the camp as well as a long and really beautiful fresco - painting and mosaic telling about the Nakba (= the 1948 and 1967 catastrophes). Aida camp, like all the other refugee camps, was supposed to be an assortment of temporary living quarters. Yet none of the refugees could go back home : their houses were destroyed or are now occupied by Israeli settlers. On their way, our photographers make a little detour by one of Aida's kindergartens and sing some French nursery rhymes for the kids. The two teachers suggest the Fab' Four to come back next week and take charge of one or two activities with the kids : it's a deal, they will and they'll bring pots of paint, papers, scissors, glue, pearls, musical instruments and colourful balloons !... In the afternoon, we all go to **Deheisheh refugee camp** where we interview **Oussama**. Back in Al-Rowwad centre we give a hand to **Mourad** and **Ahmad** who are busy mounting the forthcoming exhibition of pictures taken by the participants of the "Images for Life" workshop.

Friday, April 10, 2009

On the menu today the interviews of **Jamal** (18) and **Mustapha** (16), the two other members of the *Freedom Sons' Band*. **Samira** (30, one of the young adults in charge of the administration in Al-Rowwad with Oussama, Marwa and Salam) has kindly accepted to do the translation in spite of all the work she has got and the surrounding excitement : today is the inauguration-day of the photo exhibition, an important moment for all the members of the "Images for Life" workshop and there is indeed much stress in the air ! This opening ceremony is part of a complete programme of festivities organised in the context of "*Jerusalem, 2009 cultural city*". Important people are coming and everything must be ready in time. The pictures are really beautiful, so strong too. They allow us a glimpse into the Palestinians' everyday life as they, with their young eyes, see it. A few official speeches, a presentation of the history of the projects and an expression of thanks to all those who, in Palestine and in France believed in it and supported it. Then, it's time to give their certificates to all those whose training in photography is finished : emotions, congratulations, emotions again... In the evening, we all meet at the Guest House as usual and savour our friends' success and pleasure while cooking together, playing cards or chess or a bit of guitar. **Ribal** (19, without any doubt the most impressive of all the Al-Rowwad young people), feels relieved and so happy the exhibition is a real success. He lets go at last, smiles a bit then laughs with all his heart and says he feels ready now for the interview... We of course jump on the opportunity : camera and Mp3 are switched on in a second and we all listen to him .

Saturday, April 11, 2009

Up at 7 a.m. : today we are going to Hebron. Mazen, Ayssar and Mohammed are coming with us. One hour travel on winding roads in a rather bad state. All along, Israeli settlements on top of the hills, modern roads that link them together, which Palestinians are forbidden to use, soldiers, jeeps, control towers, checkpoints... We visit **Hebron** together with young Palestinian students in architecture who work for the *Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Old Town of Hebron*. They first take us all to the **Patriarchs' Tombs/ Ibrahim's Mosque**, a religious place Muslims

and Jews “share”. Before we are allowed to enter it, we all have to queue up at three control-posts where we are questioned (quite dryly) by young armed Israeli, taken our passports while our bags and pockets are checked... Living in Aida has helped us forget a bit about the brutality of the soldiers at Bethlehem checkpoint, but we are back to it again. As we come out of the Mosque, the soldiers first refuse to give our young Palestinian friends their documents back and then concentrate on **Ayssar** (18) and rather harshly lay into him because apparently he doesn't have the right papers with him. Later in the day, we will learn that he has been sent to prison in Jerusalem, where his father will have to go and collect him...

Our young guides take us now to the souks of the old town : above our heads the blue sky and wire fencing and nets stretched across the street holding back household refuse, rubbish of all kinds, even stones (heavy enough to knock somebody out or even kill him !) : all things thrown on the Palestinians by the Jewish settlers who have annexed the upper floors and terraces of the houses of the old town. On the roofs, armed soldiers pointing their machine guns at us... Quite a weird feeling.

We are now back in the offices of the *Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Old Town of Hebron* where a slide-show is offered to us : there are different maps that clearly show the progressive confinement of the Palestinians of Hebron, the Israeli sealing off of the town.

We will spend the evening in Bethlehem smallest refugee camp : **Al-Aaroub**. That's where Tareq lives for the moment. Oussama is there too as well as two young Americans he has met. We tell them about our plan to go to Nablus the next day and invite them to join us.

Sunday, April 12, 2009

Before we get to **Nablus**, we are stopped and controlled by young soldiers at **Howara checkpoint**,. We use the opportunity to have **Layali** and **Mohammad** climb into our little coach. Both are former students of the French Department at Nablus' An-Najah University and will show us round the town today before taking us to **the refugee camp of Balata**, the largest refugee camp in the West Bank. There, the director of Yafa Cultural Centre introduces us to “his” camp before letting us go through it. We are in total shock as soon as we enter the camp : unacceptable living conditions are imposed on hundreds of children, women and men who have lost everything because of the Israeli occupation... Back on the coach, we all keep silent for a long while, all too upset by what we have witnessed inside the camp of Balata. But it will take us more than one hour to leave Nablus : from checkpoints to flying control posts, from waiting “for nothing” to tough questionings and thorough checking of our mini bus, one hour of stress generated by the painful impression to be little more than a toy in the hands of young but omnipotent soldiers, whom the slightest thing could make go off... Which is what all the Palestinians are subjected to every day of their life, each time they have to or want to go somewhere inside the West Bank.

Monday, April 13, 2009

We haven't planned much for today : we have the preceding days to stomach!... Yet Théodore, Diane, Louise, Sophie, Julien and Laetitia eventually leave with the necessary material for the promised activities at the kindergarten they visited last

Thursday. Around 4 p.m., **Sandra** turns up. She has worked for more than 2 years as a volunteer in Aida. Today, she is taking 4 kids to the dentist Laetitia, Théodore and Anne-Claire join them so she can tell them about her project of education to dental hygiene... as well as about all the trouble she has with the Israeli administration to get her visas. Relaxing afternoon in **Bethlehem**, where we meet **Allah** who invites us for a cup of mint tea in his little souvenir shop and tell us an incredible story of civil resistance. We all go back to **Aida**, head to our Guest House where we prepare the evening meal. Our last meal in Aida : our rappers sing a song they have written for us ! They have little presents for each of us : little Teddy-bears, fluffy hearts, recordings of their songs... It is going to be hard to leave them tomorrow...

Tuesday, April 14, 2009

Our last day in **Aida**. We keep ourselves busy to prevent sadness overtaking us : a cleaning-team to return a spotless Guest House to our hosts while a pictorial-art-team go in search of a patch wall on which to leave a surprise-present to our friends : an enormous smiley made of all our names interwoven... A last interview before we leave : **Mustapha Abu-Srou** (50) and his mother **Sabha** tell us about her son sentenced to life imprisonment... A last cup of tea and then we have no other choice but go... We haul bags and guitars on our backs, and for the last time, walk up the street that leads to *Al-Rowwad center*. All along, the kids, the little shop-keepers who have got to know us wave good bye at us, as well as other people, as if we had been in Aida for a long time. All our friends are waiting for us in front of the Centre. Long and warm hugs, smiles and strings of Thank you - merci - *chukran*. We get on the mini bus that drives us back to **Bethlehem checkpoint**... But this time, nothing can penetrate our armour of positive emotions and energies : neither the turnstiles nor the electronic portal that rings again and again, not even the invisible soldier that orders us to take off all our jewels, our shoes and belt.

On the other side, we climb on the bus to **Jerusalem**. We are back in our youth hostel at Jaffa Gate. We absolutely don't feel like staying in the old city at this moment : it is the end of the *Pessah* celebrations and the streets are full of the ever haughty orthodox Jews. We need to go for a drink in a nice place with our friend **Daoud**. He gives us some stickers « *I'm proud I didn't take part in the occupation of Jerusalem* » Then, back to the youth hostel for a good night's rest.

Wednesday, April 15, 2009

We are happy to have breakfast on the terrace we already know. Then it's up to everybody : some go for a stroll inside the souks of the old town, others visit **David's Tower**. We have lunch at the same Palestinian snack-bar as the last time we were here (near the Damascus Gate). **Daoud** catches us up as we are about to climb into the *sherout* that will take us to Tel Aviv. Au revoir, adieu, see you again one day, *inch'allah!*...

When we get off in **Tel Aviv**, we head to the youth hostel we are staying in for the next two nights... We look at the people coming and going around us... No orthodox Jews here, but filthy streets and homeless people lying rough or on cardboard

boxes. We are quite disgusted : we were candid enough to imagine that the Israeli government at least saw to it that all the Jews of Israel had a decent life... We walk down on the beach for a while up to the little **port of Jaffa**, have dinner in the charming *Puaa* restaurant (we recommend!), then go back to our youth hostel.

Thursday, April 16, 2009

Morning in **Jaffa** for « the more than 25 », flea-market and ice-creams, while the « less than 25 » have a great lie-in at the youth hostel before making the most of **Tel Aviv's beach**... We have lunch at the "*Tamar café*" in Sheinken Street (we recommend too!) before visiting the *Haganah Museum*, where we find ourselves drowned in the middle of tens of young armed and rather arrogant soldiers and where we attend the showing of a "documentary film" on the history of Israel that leaves us flabbergasted.

3 p.m. We are at the **station** of the trains to the airport. There, we are subjected to a series of controls that are incredibly brutal on the part of the Israeli security guards; which only stops when we get on the plane. The luckiest in the group manage to fall asleep, the others endure the flight in silence. Bierset airport, shuttle to **Brussels**, then mummies and daddies, then home for everybody, wild with tiredness...