

# Chapter III

## THE PALESTINIAN ARCHIPELAGO

by Sophie

*Hello, I am Sophie. I was only 17 and still at secondary school when I left to Palestine. Today, I am almost 20 and a young theatre and film actress. At the time, I thought I was only going to take a long trip, but I soon became aware that, in fact, the trip was building me up.*

We spent three quarters of our trip in the Aida refugee camp. Yet, our steps also led us to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron and Nablus in the West Bank. The Palestinians we met there are not refugees. They live on their lands, some still in their own houses. But for all that, their living conditions are far from normal. They live “on the other side of the wall”, the concrete barrier the Israelis have been building since 2002 on Palestinian lands. They are the “Palestinians of the Occupied Territories” living in A or B-zone<sup>34\*</sup>, theoretically under Palestinian authority) and have been living under Israeli occupation for more than 60 years now. I would like to tell you about them.

On the day after we arrived in Jerusalem, first stage of our trip, we asked two taxi-drivers - both of them Palestinians, like all the local taxi-drivers - to take us to a place from which we could have an overall view of the old city. There, they gave us information about all the towers, domes, steeples and minarets we could see as well as about different modern buildings outside the old walls. As we asked about the Israeli flag that was flapping nearby, they told us that this was what the Israelis do to show they had taken over houses : “*A way to indicate that their territory is expanding every day*”, they added. Also a way to indicate to the Israeli army and police that Israelis live there when they are operating.

As we observed the surroundings more closely, we noticed many other flags. Our guides indicated the different Jewish settlements that are surrounding the annexed

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<sup>34</sup> . The Palestinian territory (the West Bank, Gaza and East-Jerusalem) was cut into 3 zones after the 1993 Oslo Agreements :

- A = under the civil jurisdiction of the *Palestinian Authority* – i.e. 3% of the West Bank, 60% of the Gaza strip

- B = within the civil competence of the Palestinian Authority but interior security is exercised jointly with the Israeli army, i.e. 27% of the Palestinian territory

- C = exclusively under the control of the Israeli State, i.e. 70% of the territory

For more details, see gloss at the end of the book, “Zones”

city and are now part of today's "Great Jerusalem", a wide territory the A and B-zone Palestinians are excluded from : *"We need a permit to go from one place to another now, and have to make hour-long detours"*, our guides explained.

We met **Daoud\*** after this first overview, near the Youth hostel we were staying in in the Christian district\* of the old city : 26 years old, tall and awfully kind. He offered to take us on an "alternative tour" and introduced us to a Palestinian guide who took us into the maze of the old streets while telling us about the "qualitative grading" of the Palestinian population.

*"For Israel", the guide explained to us, "there are different kinds of Palestinians. At the bottom of the scale, you find the Palestinians of Gaza Strip\*. They actually live in an open-air prison. Just above them, there the Palestinians of the West Bank : they aren't allowed to come to Jerusalem nor to leave the territories occupied by Israel."*

*"Then, you have the Palestinians of Jerusalem. Though there were born and live in this town, though they pay their taxes, they are not are not considered as full-fledged citizens but as mere residents (although they live in their own houses) : they don't have the right to vote and, if indeed they have an Israeli ID, they will lose it automatically if they leave Jerusalem for a too long period or if they decide to go and live in the West Bank.. If a boy falls in love with a girl from the West bank, she can't come to Jerusalem and he loses his blue ID if he goes to the West Bank. The Palestinian of Jerusalem are, in fact, foreigners in their own city... The fact is, when Israel started building the separating wall, many Palestinians left everything they had in the West Bank to come back to Jerusalem, even though life here is much more expensive here than in the West Bank. Indeed, they were afraid of losing their ID and of being prevented from ever being able to come back home .."*

*"Finally, at the top of the scale, you find the 1948 Palestinians, or Israeli Arabs as the Israelis call them, i.e. the Palestinians who stayed on the territory that became Israel after 1948. These 1.2 million of "Israeli-citizen Palestinians" are but second-zone citizens and suffer numerous discriminations. They can go and visit their family in the West Bank but are subjected to restrictions at all levels. Just one example to illustrate this : in this country, you can get a housing-allowance only after you have done your military service. But only few Palestinians accept to serve in the occupying army. Consequently..."*

As for our friend **Daoud**, he was born in Jerusalem, lives and works in the old town, which is under Israeli occupation. Quite soon we came to witness a number of facts that confirmed what **Marianne Blume\*** had told us about the Arabs of Israel : they are not much better off than their refugee fellow-men. There are not only all these surveillance cameras everywhere in the old town of Jerusalem, particularly in the Muslim district, which spy all the Arab Israelis' moves (as well as ours). There are not only all these soldier patrolling going up and down the *souks* as if the country was at war. There is above all a sickening discrimination all the time, which we could witness more than once. Just one example of this : as we were all going down to the Wailing Wall and passing through the checkpoint leading to it (security measures. Ok, we don't want to discuss that. We showed our

passports and opened our bags), Daoud was coldly sent packing with no other reason than being an Arab : his face simply didn't fit. No need to tell how shocked we were : we thought naively that apartheid had existed in America and South Africa only and belonged to the past. Yet what impressed us most was Daoud's composure : he obeyed the soldiers quietly and kept on smiling peacefully, obviously used to all this.<sup>35</sup>

When we first met Daoud, he was working at the [Nidal Cultural Centre\\*](#), which like most cultural centres in the West Bank organized different workshops and training courses for the local women and children. *"There is much social work to do, he had told us then. Nothing is organized by the Israeli authorities for the Palestinians. And they don't help us, quite the opposite : the soldiers constantly put spokes in our wheels. Last year, for example, they suddenly decided to close the dance festival we had been preparing for a long time. The kids had already got their costumes on and were ready to go on stage...."* And he had commented quietly: *"This is part of the daily vexations they inflict on us."*

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2009, we got an e-mail from Daoud telling us that on 14 July 2009, Israeli soldiers and policemen had closed the Nidal Centre<sup>36</sup>. *"Currently, Daoud wrote to us, I'm working in a Centre located in another district of Jerusalem. There I go on doing things for the Nidal Centre : for example now, I'm making a film about all the activities we organized there... The problem is that this centre can't take in the Nidal children in addition to those they are already looking after... When I meet the parents, they beg me to try to find a solution because now their kids are back on the streets and potential victims to the usual street problems : drugs and violence."*

But Daoud can do nothing except fight for the Nidal Centre to be recognized as "not dangerous for the security of Israel"... And hope that here, in Europe, people rally to the Israeli practices against the working Palestinian organizations in Jerusalem being stopped.

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At the end of our second day in Jerusalem, we took the bus that led us to Bethlehem checkpoint, from which we went to Aida refugee camp where we stayed for ten days. Two one-day outings were planned during this stay : one to Hebron in the South of the occupied Palestine, the other to Nablus in the North.

Hebron is about 30 km away from the camp but it took us more than one hour to get there by the narrow winding roads (most of them in poor condition) that are the only ones open to the Palestinians. On the way : the wall at a distance, Israeli settlements on top of the hills, wide modern roads linking them, the wall a bit closer, soldiers, jeeps, the wall again, control towers, checkpoints... The occupied territories are indeed occupied. Please note the Israelis refer to them simply as "The Territories".

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<sup>35</sup> See chapter 1 : Living under Occupation

<sup>36</sup> June 2011 : The Nidal centre is still kept closed by the Israeli authorities

In Hebron we were welcomed by **Chantal Abu-Eisheh** from the Hebron-France friendship and her husband : an impressive bearded Palestinian professor who spoke an excellent French. We shared different cars that drove us to the old town. On the way down, **Professor Anouar Abu-Eisheh** stopped on the road that overhangs the city and explained to us what we could see : *“The Martyrs-street, which is 3-km long and which Palestinians inhabitants of Hebron are prohibited to use, divides the town into two zones : Hebron 1 (H1) and Hebron 2 (H2). Hebron 2 (including the old city) is occupied by Israel. This means that the army has got all the power”*<sup>37</sup>.

Pointing at different buildings, he described the slow process of colonisation of his town : *“Israeli constructions have multiplied since the 1993 Oslo Agreements. The settlers have either built their houses on former Palestinian buildings or have annexed them. Roads have been forbidden to the Palestinian inhabitants and watch-posts set up “to ensure the security of the Israeli population”... What is special about this town is that wherever you are, you are observed and controlled from everywhere : there are cameras and watch towers everywhere”*, he concluded while inviting us to get back into the cars.

Once we had arrived in the old city, our professor-driver left us in the hands of two women students in architecture who work for the **Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Old Town of Hebron**. They first took us to the Patriarchs' Tombs / Ibrahim's Mosque \*, a religious place Muslims and Jews share. Anyone wanting to go into the mosque part of the building, whether as a tourist or to pray, has to go through three control-posts : at the first one, we were questioned (quite dryly) by young Israeli soldiers (*“where from, why here, who, what... ?”*) and had to pass through a metal-detector portal and take off belt, jewels, shoes. At the second control-post (3 meters away) the soldiers took our passports. At the third one (another few meters away) we were asked the same questions again. *“The aim of it all is to discourage, or even prevent the Palestinians from going to the mosque”*..., our young guides confided to us.

On the Israeli side, they speak about ensuring the security of the Jewish population. This makes you wonder when you remember that on February 25, 1994 Baruch Goldstein, a doctor from the neighbouring settlement of Kyriat Arba opened fire on the congregation with a machine-gun and murdered 29 people, wounded 150 before he was beaten to death. *“His tomb has now become a pilgrimage place for all the fanatical Israeli settlers, Anya\** one of the young guides told us. *After this massacre the mosque was closed for 6 months. When it was opened again, it was cut into two.”* One part is now a synagogue - we could catch a glimpse of practicing Jews carrying weapons, the other one being the mosque, which Muslims (and tourists) can only gain access to after passing through three control posts.

As we were leaving the mosque, we bumped into messy little kids who were all carrying plastic cans and buckets : *“They have come to get their daily soup from the soup kitchen”*, Anya explained to us : *“The population of the old city is very poor : most small businesses have had to close down on military order or because their Palestinian owners have left with the hope of a better life for their children*

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<sup>37</sup> See « Hebron » and « Zones » in the gloss at the end of the book, as well as the maps

*elsewhere. Soup is distributed everyday to all those who come and ask for some". She pointed out at an open door discreetly : "The distribution takes place in this house, which is just next to their school. But because of the control posts, the children have to make a 350meter detour to reach it... It is part of the difficulties and humiliations they subject the Palestinians to", the young guide commented quietly.*

Where had we already heard this? Whose voice did we remember saying the same thing in the same much too reasonable way?... It was Daoud's, in Jerusalem.

We now had to go through the three control posts again and get our passports back before we could continue visiting the town. But the soldiers refused to return the documents back to the three boys from Aida who had come with us. Then they concentrated on **Ayssar**, 18, and laid into him rather harshly because, apparently, he didn't have the right papers with him.<sup>38</sup>

Everybody in the group was shattered : so many arbitrary actions and this blatant violence, including against us, decent Westerners (!). We felt hardly more shielded from the soldiers' brutality than the Palestinians. The only difference, but this is important, is that apart from making us waste our time, the soldiers couldn't really harm us. As for the Palestinians, they are sent to prison faster than one can imagine (Ayssar was indeed sent to Jerusalem prison where his father had to go to fetch him the next day). So we all felt both revolted and so sad for **Mazen\*** and **Mohammed\***, the two other boys from Aida : it was the first time they had been in Hebron.

On our guides' advice (and they looked really anxious that we should stop "harassing" the soldiers!), we agreed to move away and follow them for the visit. To go to the old souks of Hebron, we now had to make a big detour to get just a bit farther down the same road, which was barred and guarded by other soldiers. *"This is the lot of the Palestinians of Hebron", Anya told us. "I know several families who are trapped behind a barricade that forces them to negotiate a twelve-kilometre detour before they can get a few meters further down their street. If they could go directly, it would take them two minutes..."*

The old souk was deserted. The poorest people of the town survive there the best they can. Messy little children harassed us until we bought their little trifles : *"Help us, please, help us"...* *"In Palestine", Marianne Blume \** had told us before we left, *" the occupation is also economic\_: neither Gaza nor the West Bank are developed. The Israelis don't allow the Palestinians to establish new industries, build houses nor dig wells. The rate of unemployment is high since there is nothing to do there. The Palestinian and Israeli economies are interwoven : the Palestinians used to go and work in Israel. They made up a cheap and available reserve manpower. But then, Israel didn't want the Palestinian workers anymore. It now uses people from the Philippines and from Sri Lanka, who are ill-treated and have no decent status".*

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<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 1: Living under Occupation

The covered street went a bit uphill now. More stalls were open, more goods were on sale. Then there was sunshine again and, above our heads, the blue sky and... armed soldiers on the roofs, wire fencing and nets stretched across the street holding back household refuse, rubbish of all kinds, (even stones !), all things thrown on the Palestinians by the Jewish settlers who have annexed the upper floors and terraces of the Palestinian houses. Our guide smiled at us : *“You know, all these settlements built on top of the old houses are illegal : according to international law, it is strictly forbidden to erect new buildings on old ones”*.

It was the first time we saw a city colonized to that point : 500 settlers immobilize 120,000 people in Hebron. It was also the first time we saw a city in which the settlements are that much interlocked in the Palestinian social fabric. In Jerusalem, the settlements were “outside” the old city, not interwoven like here. Jews and Arabs live one above the other. Surprising too was that some Arab districts were completely emptied of their inhabitants : *“Only Jewish settlers still go there to throw stones at the kids who have to go through these streets”*, and we remembered **Jean-François**\*’s warning before we had left to Palestine: *“In case of provocation by Jewish settlers, never answer back. Indeed, you must know that behind them, there are always soldiers taking aim at you”*.

After we had walked up and down the streets of old Hebron, we all went back to the offices of the [Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Old Town](#) where a power-point presentation was awaiting us : we were shown different maps that clearly illustrated the progressive confinement of the Palestinians of Hebron and the Israeli sealing off of the town. **Abdel**, the President of the Committee completed the information we had already been given : *“ In 1967, the Israelis started building settlements all around and inside Hebron. They divided the town into two, forbade the Palestinians to go from the one side to the other (whether on foot or by car) and multiplied the pressures and prohibitions forcing the Palestinians to leave the town and its surroundings. The aim of it all was to be able to enlarge the territory of the settlements even more”*.

*“At present there are six settlements in Hebron, five of which in the old town, which make up a maximum of 400 settlers. Yet, 1500 soldiers have been dispatched to ensure their security. In addition to the biased history courses they were given at school, the soldiers of the Israeli army have all been brainwashed and are indeed convinced that they are here at their life’s peril, surrounded by Palestinians who are all (potential) terrorists. Yet, it is the settlers who actually terrorize the inhabitants of Hebron. Some of them set up raids in the town, or just pace up and down the streets everyday in an arrogant way while letting their children make fun of the Palestinians...”<sup>39</sup>”*

*“Today, the town’s economy is dead. The customers have all gone. 75 % of the shops have closed down, the unemployment rate is high. There is but only one access to the mosque and, consequently, endless queues because of the permanent controls. The schoolchildren’s satchels are searched every day on their way to or back from school. Some were even body-searched, which traumatized them to the point that they preferred to stop going to school and stay locked at home.”*

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<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 1 : Living under Occupation

Yet in Hebron, just like in east-Jerusalem, Aida and Balata, the Palestinians work at taking care of themselves, against all what the Israelis can inflict them : *“252 people work at the rehabilitation of old houses (850 restored flats already !). Our Committee is keen on restoring these old houses as well as on creating playgrounds for the children and bringing Beauty back into the town : each stone is hand-cut, carved and set by qualified craftsmen we have trained to ancient techniques... But our work is by the Israeli soldiers who either arrest the workmen-craftsmen and throw them into prison, or stop them from going to their building-site (they then work behind their back !), or prevent the necessary materials from being delivered on the sites. Good to know is that the Palestinians of Hebron aren't allowed to use a car : they have the materials carried by donkeys, but it costs a lot in time and money !”*

*“The Israelis are ready to do anything to drive the Palestinians to leaving Hebron. But thanks to the Committee for the Rehabilitation, the number of Palestinians living in the old town has increased from 1000 in 1993 to 3-4000 people today : the Committee tries to re-create a residential area in the old town, encouraging the people to come back and live here. It develops cultural activities to attract customers and tries to stop the Israeli invasion. We get money from our sponsors : Switzerland for example has enabled us to rehabilitate a whole street and to plant trees that will soon blossom”.*

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Our second trip outside the camp of Aida was to go to Nablus. The journey up there was quite long, not because the town is far (it's about 70 km away from Aida, Bethlehem) but because of all the barriers, detours and controls. It was going to take us about two hours and a half so we had got up early that morning too. **Oussama** had arranged for a coach to come and fetch us in front of the centre. We are very happy to take him as well as **Tareq** and **Mohammed** on this one)day trip outside the camp. We all climb in, eager to tell Michael and Ty ( the two American globe-trotters we had met and invited to come with us) that they should forget what they had been told about the place being dangerous. Our experience so far was that the West Bank was safe and its people really welcoming.

So, for the second time, we drove through the occupied Palestine and across a landscape of arid hills that gave us an idea of what Palestine must have looked like in Jesus' s time... Yet, again, we couldn't escape the scar the separating wall was, nor the settlements, as always proudly perched on the hills and dominating the valleys... We drove past Ramallah, Salfit and through different villages...

*“Nablus\_has a really oppressive atmosphere”, Jean-François had told us before we left to Palestine : “This town is overcrowded, dusty, filthy. The Palestinians live in the valley, the Israelis on the hills (like everywhere in the West Bank : it is a matter of keeping the control). There were very hard fights in Nablus in 2002-2003, and the scars of it are on the town and its people's faces.... It is impossible pour them to go outside the city, nor to build a house when the family expands”.*

To illustrate how much the occupation by Israel is also economic, **Marianne Blume\*** had informed us that *“in Nablus, no lorry can go into nor leave the town. The Israelis apply the back-to-back system, i.e. a coming lorry is searched, than unloaded into another lorry on the other side of the checkpoint, which raises the transport costs and consequently the cost of the produces. You should also know”*, Marianne Blume had added, *“that the Palestinians can only buy from the Israelis : if there is no flour left, they just aren’t allowed to go and buy some elsewhere.”*

Before we could get into the city of Nablus, our mini coach was stopped at Howara checkpoint<sup>40</sup>, and Israeli soldiers (same age, same style as before) checked us. We used the opportunity to -discreetly - let our two guides, **Layali** and **Mohammad**, get into the coach. Both were freshly graduated students of the French Department at Nablus **An-Najah University** and spoke great French ! Mohammad was particularly keen on showing us what he knew.

They first took us into a soap factory where the world famous Nablus soap is still hand-made, then in the old souks that were reminiscent of Jerusalem old souks, except for the tourists. There weren’t in fact many. A passer-by, whom we had started chatting with, invited us to climb up to the terrace of the house he was currently living in : he had lost his in the 2002-2003 bombing. The place was half-dilapidated too as a result of the Israeli shooting at a time when the focus was on bringing the inhabitants/rebels/terrorists of Nablus in to line. From the terrace we had a great overall view of the old town place as well as of the holes Israeli bullets left in the water tanks the Palestinians keep on the roofs of their houses.

Layali and Mohammad then led us to the **DIA French Centre\*** (DIA for Dialogue), which aims (among others) at organising cultural exchanges with French-speaking people, and to the **Project Hope Association\***: just like in Aida, Jerusalem, Hebron and other towns in the West Bank, citizens take the lead to look after the Palestinian people, and more particularly after the children.

Late in the afternoon, we left Nablus, made a painful stop at Balata refugee camp<sup>41</sup>, then were on the road again to get back to Aida. We had the feeling that the inhabitants of Nablus, a rather poor and dirty town, probably suffered less from the occupation than all the other people we had met up to then. But we were quickly brought down to the reality of the unbearable situation faced by all Palestinians: denied freedom of movement, locked, watched over, infantilised and totally at the mercy of the young Israeli soldiers’ whim or mood<sup>42</sup>.

- 5.05 p.m. We had only been driving for a few minutes when the traffic suddenly came to a standstill. *“Checkpoint”*, **Martine\*** told us with a serious look. On both sides of the road, cars, coaches, vans were now waiting bumper-to-bumper until they were allowed to pass the organized bottleneck. It calls the toll motorways to mind except that there the inspectors were soldiers, young, nervous and rude. We watched how they had ordered everybody to get out of the coach stopped a few meters ahead of us. We couldn’t help letting out some surprise, then indignation

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<sup>40</sup> Howara checkpoint has now (end 2010) been lifted

<sup>41</sup> cf. Chapter 2 : Refugees in their own country

<sup>42</sup> cf. Chapter 1 : Living under Occupation, and Chapter 2 : Refugees in their own Country

kicks in : it really looked as if the soldiers were making fools of these young men and women who had no choice but to obey their humiliating orders.<sup>43</sup>

- 5.25 p.m., the students' coach had eventually been allowed through the control-post and so has the car just behind it. Our driver went through the motion of starting the bus but ten meters ahead, a soldier raised an open hand meaning "don't !", then made another sign : "everybody out !". While we were complying, he went back to the sentry box where his colleagues were making the most of the little shadow there was there and let us wait for a moment in the sun.

We were all getting more and more nervous as the time was passing. Exasperated too : this was such an absurd situation ! At home we would have immediately sensed a candid camera, a bad joke. But we were not at home, and this was no joke. The soldier finally came back towards us. Then, from far, he ordered us to move further to the side of the road, where he let us wait again. Finally, he and three of his colleagues came up to us, looked us over from head to toe and then pointed at Tareq. They made a sign "documents !", examined them carefully before giving them back, did the same with Oussama and Mohammed without saying a word to any of them. They then turned towards our mini-bus, made a sign to the driver who started the engine and drove level with them before stopping again. They all three climbed inside the coach and searched it. Then one of the soldiers came out, machine-gun pointing at us and asked dryly : "Where you from ? What you do here? Why you here ?..." We answered : "From Belgium. We are tourists. Beautiful country here". "What you do in Nablus ? Dangerous city !". We put on an air of surprise and answered in their kind of English : "We met architects from the Committee of Rehabilitation. We no problem there." Obviously, it didn't satisfy him. He went back and fetched his colleagues who again went through the whole group with a fine-tooth comb and stopped on... Laetitia. They ordered her to follow them<sup>44</sup>. While we were waiting for her to come back, we watched how on the other side of the road, a dog on a leash was going round a car, sniffing at it inside and outside. The Palestinian driver followed its little game patiently - anyhow he didn't have a word to say. That's the way things happen at the checkpoints : automatic presumption of guilt...

- 5.45 p.m. We were allowed to get back into the coach. All of us were holding our breath as we watched the checkpoint slowly grow more and more distant and finally disappear behind us. Tareq, Oussama and Mohammed suddenly gave free rein to their relief, called each other from one end of the coach to the other, congratulated and kidded each other and we understood that all the noise they were now making only measured up to the agony they had been through.

- 5.55 p.m. We had been driving for about ten minutes when we heard our driver swear : three soldiers were standing across the roads, exact replica of their colleagues that were pointing their M16 rifles at us. We all cried out in exasperation : not again ! "Flying Checkpoint", Martine said, pulling a wry face in disgust. The soldiers still looked as young and rough. Yet, what was new was that one of them was black. We remembered Saïf's \* warning before we had left to Palestine : "Beware of the black and female soldiers. They are so ill-treated, so

<sup>43</sup> cf. Chapter 1 : Living under Occupation

<sup>44</sup> cf. Chapter 1 : Living under Occupation

*badly-considered in the army that they are ready to do anything to prove they are "real" Israelis. Thus they are often worse than the others".*

This was borne out immediately. The driver was ordered to draw the coach up on a small gravelled parking-place alongside the road. Anne-Claire and Louise got down and explained : *"We are from Belgium. We are tourists, a group of students from a catholic school"*. The soldiers didn't even pretend they had heard them. They held out their hands, took the passports and brutally asked the blasted old questions again : *"Where from ? Why here ?"* They both repeated patiently *"From Belgium"*. As it didn't seem to ring a bell at all, they tried, *"Brussels ?"*. In vain. Then, using her both hands, Anne-Claire drew a map of Europe in the air : *"France, here, England, there, Germany, here, Belgium in the middle, you know ?"*. Obvious waste of time and effort, the soldiers didn't know.

Still holding the passports, they all three climbed into the mini-bus where they quickly spotted the Arabic individuals that were with us. *"Passport !"*, they ordered before leaving the coach and headed to their jeep where a fourth soldier checked the data on a portable computer. We saw them write down we-don't-know-what and then they came back. Anne-Claire and Louise smiled at them and held out their hands to get the passports back . But with the end of his M16 rifle, one of the soldiers ordered them both to go back into the bus. He followed them and shouting at Tareq, started questioning him in Hebrew. Tareq, who understands Hebrew, answered back *"Speak English !"*.

Surprise : the soldier suddenly kept quiet, turned round and went out to rejoin his colleagues. The bus started again while we were asking Tareq what the matter was. He smiled : *"He doesn't know English and he probably felt stupid in front of you all, tourists. So he preferred to drop it"*. And Martine confirmed : *"Two of them were Russians, the third one Ethiopian. The Israelis consist of Jews who have come from everywhere. Most of them speak English but not all of them. Between them, they speak Hebrew..."* We dared to ask "the" question : *"You must hate them, don't you ?"* but Oussama shrugged his shoulders : *"That's the way things are here. There is nothing we can do about it..."*

- 6.10 p.m.. Checkpoint again... We hadn't gone through any on our way to Nablus, but on our way back there was one every 200 metres, *"because we are heading to Jerusalem"*, Martine explained again. Speed bumps again, sentry-boxes again, soldiers again but it was the end of a long hot day for everyone (and, after all, his colleagues had already checked it all !) : the soldier in charge just made the coach stop, had a glance through the window-panes : there was nothing but angel-faces to be seen inside so he made a sign to the driver : *"yallah !"*.. Move on !...

And that was it... It had taken us one hour to cover about ten hundred metres. One hour of stress generated by the painful feeling we were but mere toys in the hands of young immature but omnipotent soldiers who could let rip at the slightest thing. One hour only, only once in a lifetime, with the assurance that our status as foreign tourists guaranteed that nothing really awful could happen to us. As for our Palestinian friends, as for all the Palestinians of the West Bank, it is so much a daily occurrence in their life each time they need to go from one place to another : waiting for hours, depending on soldiers who have barely grown out of their teens,

with the painful certainty of having no means whatsoever to influence their decision on whether they are let through quickly or not.

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It was our last day behind the wall. That night we were leaving back to Jerusalem where we hoped we could say bye to Daoud. Then we would go to Tel-Aviv and Jaffa before flying back to Belgium. Already.

Our last afternoon in Bethlehem : Sandra\* had invited us to the little flat she shared in Bethlehem with a French “ *photographer for peace*” who is always very lucky with her visas !. On the way, she stopped in front of a stone staircase leading to the wooden door of a house. Sandra opened it ... on open space ! The inside walls, the roof, the floors of the house had all collapsed. Here and there, it was still possible to distinguish the arch of a window, a broken cupboard, torn clothes, a shelf still hanging on the wall of what used to be a bedroom. All of it slowly but surely getting grown over by wild bushes. “*This house was destroyed by the 2002 bombings during the second intifada, she told us... And if you look straight ahead, towards the hills, you can see one of the Israeli settlements that surround Bethlehem. More than 40% of the houses there are empty. Despite that, they go on building, stretching their territory.*”

We went down the stairs that were now leading to nowhere and followed Sandra to the Peace Centre, just next to the Nativity Church of Bethlehem. Suddenly a man's voice called for Sandra “*Hey ! It's Allah\* ! A friend !..*” Allah holds one of the many souvenir shops on the *Saint Paul IV Street* that leads to the Nativity Church. But “*Business is getting worse and worse for all these little shopkeepers, Sandra said. Henri Wajnbium\* had warned us : “In Bethlehem, which is completely hemmed in by the wall, scarcity and begging are the rule. The town is economically dead as a result of colonisation : the Palestinians are forced to leave, some of them (more especially the Christians) have gone abroad to the USA or South America... But where can the Muslims go ?,” he had wondered.*

One way or another, it was impossible to refuse Allah's invitation : we all entered his small stall (12 sq metres at the most), sat down on the heaps of carpets for sale and had a nice glass of hot mint-tea together.

And then, Allah started to tell us the wonderful story of some stolen freedom<sup>45</sup> and what Oussama had confided to us one night suddenly took its real dimension : “ *We have to be strong if we want to survive all this. But I think nobody can live without hope. Ask any Palestinian : hope, what does this small word mean for them ? Nobody will tell you about fantastic dreams. We just want to be able to live normally, be free... he fact is we can't afford to stop hoping. We can't just cry and do nothing, feel hurt, miserable. You know, when we saw what happened in Gaza in January, it broke our hearts. Yet we keep smiling. We don't know why, believe me !..*”

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<sup>45</sup> See Chapter 5 : the Beautiful Resistance of the Palestinians

Like Diane, I wonder what I could say to conclude on these two chapters telling about the men and women we met in the occupied Palestine and in Jerusalem. Maybe this : whether they are from the camps, or just from behind the wall, all of them taught us a great lesson about life, without at all trying to do so : living is resisting. This requires a lot of courage and determination, but what other choice do the Palestinians have?