

INVITATION TO MEET EACH OTHER

by Anne-Claire and Tanguy

Anne-Claire Cornet was born in 1960. She was an English teacher for 25 years, is the mother of two boys and a writer. Since always supportive of the respect of people's rights and dignity and anxious to go beyond the "politically correct, she tries at her level to work at more justice for everyone.

Tanguy Pinxteren was born in 1975. A libertarian teacher involved in increasing people's awareness and in fighting for the respect of the rights of Man, in particular the rights of the people who are marginalized or discriminated against (refugees, lesbigaytrans, freethinkers...)

When talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Western people generally can't help associating to it pictures of terrorist acts, bearded Muslims or en-keffiehed Arabs opposing the Jews of Israel, who defend the land they were given after the 1939-1945 judeocide committed in Europe. The perception we get from what the western media choose to tell us about the problem remains quite vague and indeed few people really know what the situation "over there" is like. This was our case too until we decided we should go there and see for ourselves.

At the origin of our project, there is the testimony **Tanguy** made at the school where he teaches about the "citizen observation mission" he had taken part in a few months before in Palestine under Marco Abramowicz's ^{*2} leadership. He said then that he was ready to organize a "different trip" for the 6th-grade pupils who would be interested in a project of cultural exchange in solidarity with young Palestinian people.

Five students - **Sophie, Diane, Guirec, Bénédicte and Marine** - came forward, soon caught up with by **Théodore** and **Julien**, whom we met in the course of preparation activities for the trip, in the end resulting in the participation of seven young people aged 15 to 20. They would be accompanied by **Anne-Claire**, a former teacher in that school, **Laetitia** and **Louise** who had heard about the project from a friend of a friend, i.e. four other young people aged 26 to 48.

Our objective was to share in a travel experience in total contrast with commercial tourism : we wanted to stay for about ten days in the refugee camp of Aida Tanguy had been to during his 2007 trip, share the everyday life of its inhabitants and implement the values of peace and solidarity by putting together an post- travel testimony document.

We were of course all aware that going to meet a different culture required intellectual, social and cultural involvement on our part as well as a serious

² The asterisks refer to the gloss at the end of the book

preparation. Our first mission was to try to know more about the complex reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which we did in collaboration with different partners : The Halles of Schaerbeek (cultural centre in Brussels responsible for the organisation of the 2008-2009 Masarat Palestine³ festival), the UBPJ * (Union of the Belgian Progressive Jews), the BPA * (Belgian-Palestinian Association) and **Philippe Hubot** *. From October 2008 to March 2009, we took part in a number of cultural and artistic events (lectures, round-tables, photo exhibitions, films, theatre plays...⁴) and benefited from an initiation into video and photo techniques as well as into the Arabic language.

In parallel, Tanguy got back in touch with **Martine***, the Belgian volunteer he had met in 2007. She took care of finding young Palestinians in the Aida refugee camp (near Bethlehem) who would be interested in our meeting and exchange project.

As our project was getting under way , a name was slowly emerging that could both encapsulate our (future) experience in Palestine and our group's hope : "Taayoush", a word meaning "living together" which we first heard during a debate organised by the Halles of Schaerbeek. "Taayoush" refers to exchange groups and meetings between Palestinians and Israelis who are keen on promoting dialogue and work around defending the cause and rights of the Palestinians living in the occupied territories. As for us, we wanted to go and "live together" for a while with young Palestinians, that way expressing our hope that one day, it would be possible for all the inhabitants of this corner of the world to live together in peace... So, Taayoush.

And then, suddenly it was time to go . We all felt both excited and apprehensive seeing the scope of our enterprise and had in our luggage many questions which we hoped we would find answers to : who are these "Palestinians" precisely ? What is his "Palestine" all about, which we can't find on recent maps ? What does the word "Israel" actually refer to ? What are the "Occupied Territories" ? Is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict religious or is all this about something else ?...

April 2 to April 17, 2009 were 15 days of discoveries, shocks and strong emotions. We met 16-26-year old Palestinians in Jerusalem, Hebron, Nablus, Bethlehem and more especially in the Aida refugee camp. We stayed there for ten days, shared the everyday life of 15 Palestinians who all participated in the socio-cultural activities organised by the Al-Rowwad cultural centre *.

Here is our itinerary :

Thursday April 2 : Brussels - Tel Aviv - Jerusalem
Friday April 3 : Jerusalem (old city, Bethany, Ras Al-Amoud, Abou Dis)
Saturday April 4 : Jerusalem (Nidal Cultural Centre, old city)
Sunday April 5 : Jerusalem (Al-Aqsa mosque, Silwan) - Aida
Monday April 6 : Aida - Bethlehem
Tuesday April 7 : Aida

³ www.france-palestine.org/IMG/pdf/Dossier_de_presse_PALESTINE.pdf

⁴ See the reviews / reports on the website we created (www.taayoush.be Living together in Palestine) before we launched the writing of this book

Wednesday April 8 : Aida - Salomon's Pools- Beit Jala
Thursday April 9 : Aida - refugee camp of Deheisheh
Friday April 10 : Aida
Saturday April 11 : Hebron - refugee camp of Al-Aaroub
Sunday April 12 : Nablus - refugee camp of Balata
Monday April 13 : Aida
Tuesday April 14 : Aida - Jerusalem
Wednesday April 15 : Jerusalem - Tel Aviv - Jaffa
Thursday April 16 : Tel Aviv - Brussels

The book you are now holding in your hands is a collection of the testimonies of the women and men we met in the West Bank as well as of what we saw, heard and felt during the two weeks we spent in occupied Palestine. We would like to insist on the fact that we have chosen to speak only about what we experienced ourselves all along the project. We didn't try to complete our testimonies with the information available on the net or elsewhere and are well aware that there may be some approximations, gaps or exaggerations in the information the Palestinians gave us ("emotional" or "raw" testimonies). Yet, we are convinced this doesn't make the point any less important.

Now, rather than tell you about our trip chronologically⁵, we chose to organise this documents by theme, i.e. five chapters to try to understand what living under occupation means on a daily basis, what everyday life is like for the men, women and children trapped in this situation and, above all, what enables them to remain standing. We have worked as a team on the content of the chapters and then we entrusted five "master-builders" with the final drafting : Diane, Bénédicte, Sophie, Laetitia and Marine.

We wanted to put the principles of the "Beautiful Resistance"⁶ we discovered in the West Bank into practice and we suggest you prolonged the pleasure of reading our book with the audio and visual exploration of the themes we have dealt with : do have a look at the photo selection **Théodore** prepared for you and at the semi documentary, semi poetical photo and sound montages **Tanguy** and **Anne-Claire** prepared with the brilliant cooperation of Philippe Hubot⁷.

One last word now before we let you delve further into the book : as our project of cultural exchange in solidarity with young Palestinians developed, it turned into a really enriching and inspiring human adventure. Here in Belgium as well as over there, in Palestine, we came across great women and men who, beyond ideas and principles, before defending a flag or a piece of land all try to live in harmony with their human brothers and sisters, whatever their skin colour, language or religion.

What we experienced before, during and after our trip of course helped us to better understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most important however is that we discovered how both fragile and beautiful our common humanity is. This

⁵ A brief log of the travel is nonetheless presented at the end of the book

⁶ See Chapter 5 : The Beautiful Resistance of the Palestinians

⁷ To be found on our website www.taayoush.be, together with a more detailed account of our trip

contributed to reinforcing our sensitivity toward injustice as well as our desire to get involved into building a better world for everybody.

You are now going to read about occupation, expulsion, despoliation, outrage and humiliation. But above all, you are going to meet people : Salam, Maroua, Jamal, Mustapha, Mazen, Mohammed, Ribal, Martine, Sandra, ... Here are their smiles, fears, joys, wishes and refusals, dreams and doubts, and their happiness just to be alive.

Taayoush.

