

SIXTH LETTER FROM ROSEMARY IN PALESTINE – 29/11/04

Many will have read that 2 youngsters were shot here in Nablus on Saturday 20th Nov. According to the Israelis they were firing on troops. According to OCHA (part of UN) they may have been part of a stone throwing group. According to their families they were out buying sweets. They were aged 15 and 13 years old and no one here believes they had guns. What the army were doing in that part of the Old City I don't know. It is an area where there are frequent incursions, with no explanation given.

The next day, we witnessed the funeral procession from the hospital through the streets of Nablus to the cemetery. Apart from the fact the bodies, wrapped in national flags, were on stretchers not in coffins, it reminded me of scenes of IRA and UDF funerals with political banners and slogans and shots fired in the air, though I didn't see anyone wearing a mask. No women were present which is partly due to local custom – they don't go to the cemetery on the day of the burial I know. I felt devastated for the mothers. Not only had their sons died violently and suddenly the day before, but they were excluded from the funeral rites and it seemed the “strong men” had taken over. Custom or not it seemed very harsh to me.

On Tuesday, we were invited to visit the families. In our tradition this would be a gross intrusion on personal grief, but we were assured the families wanted us to come. We were accompanied by members of the local Public Committee who could explain a little in English. We went first to the house of the 15 yr old. There, many women and two or three men were sitting and some were reading religious texts. The mother, who looked ravaged with grief, and relatives greeted their friends with a double kiss and us with handshakes. We sat in mutual silence for about 10 minutes and then left. We then proceeded to a hall where there was loud music outside. Inside, many men were sitting – not all relatives, but many friends some of whom had also lost sons and other relatives during the last couple of years. They were anxious to tell us their stories and how they felt about still more deaths. Close by was the house of the younger boy. Here we were ushered into where the mother and 2 sisters were sitting like statues and in silence. After a few minutes the mother and an auntie started talking about what had happened. The sisters just cried quietly while the mother and auntie became more and more upset, sobbing and rocking to and fro while describing the events of Saturday. I found it impossible to contain my tears – the suffering of these families, this city, this country and indeed this region is just too much.

When we left, our guide asked me to comment – I couldn't speak, but when I met her a few days later she told me how much it means having “internationals” witnessing their daily suffering and passing on the stories. If my presence meant even a little I feel my stay in this extraordinary city has been worth it.

Two days later I was in Hebron, which is in the southern part of the West Bank. Here the situation is different. There are settlers actually right inside the city – about 500 of them. I was told there are over 2000 Israeli soldiers to protect them but in fact it is they who are very aggressive towards the Palestinian residents. My job was to accompany children to and from school, to see they got through the checkpoints and to make sure settlers didn't throw stones at them. I was there on a quiet day, so the job was accomplished easily, but this hasn't been the story for all the Ecumenical Accompaniers and other Internationals in the last few months. Indeed two members of the Christian Peace Teams were seriously injured by settlers just a few weeks ago. During school time I was able to visit the Old City which was almost empty. Nets were strung across the streets to catch the rubbish thrown down by settlers who have moved into the tops of the buildings. To go shopping in the market, locals have to go through checkpoints and run the risk of verbal and even physical abuse from settlers – no wonder the market is almost deserted. In the mosque are the graves of Abraham and Sarah. How sad that a place which honours the father of 3 great faiths should now be so bitterly divided.

I am now back in Nablus for one more week. Life is not quiet here and we are told about so many incidents and personal tragedies that it is hard to see how we can recount even a fraction of them.

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