



*Eve at Quaker International Work Camp, 1970.*

## A Young Friend's Experience of an International Quaker Work Camp, Israel/Palestine 1972

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I had participated in an international Quaker work camp in 1970 in Graz, Austria and found it an eye-opening learning experience. Therefore I decided that the opportunity to go to Israel/Palestine and participate in another international Quaker work camp would be a worthwhile experience. Before I left I read as much as I could about the complex political situation in Israel/Palestine. In particular I read a book *Search for Peace in the Middle East*, written in 1970 by Friends from the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC), in association with the Friends Service Council. I

think that much what was written then is still applicable.

In 1972 I flew El Al Israel Airlines to Munich and then on to Tel Aviv. I met a friend in Munich and we toured the sites just finished in preparation for the summer Olympic Games. The view of these buildings would radically change from peaceful expectation to awful dread in September when Palestinian terrorists calling themselves Black September massacred eleven members of the Israeli Olympic Team. The pictures of the masked gunmen standing on the roof top of the sports facilities and the reports of the dead changed the image of the

terrorist in the consciousness of the world.

I was travelling on El Al Israel Airline and the recent images and stories of planes stranded on the tarmac as hijackers made their demands had also changed air travel. The hijacking at Lod Airport had just happened in May 1972.

I arrived in the airport in Tel Aviv and was shocked to see soldiers in uniform with black boots and desert camouflage holding loaded large automatic rifles. This was my introduction to the show of power that the Israelis -- out of their fear -- felt and still feel is necessary to display when one visits their small country.

I was met by an English woman, Margot Curry, who, under the auspices of AFSC and Friends Service Committee (FSC), had organized the work camp. We were about twenty students from Europe and North America. Three of us: Els DeWitt from Holland, Eila Harkonen from Finland, and me from Canada, were to be camp counselors at a summer camp for Palestinian refugee girls, ages eight to twelve who were from the ten United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) camps on the West Bank and Gaza formed after the 1967 war. The Arab counselors at the summer camp were teachers from the UNRWA schools in the camps; they were all Muslim except one, a Christian from the Bethlehem area. UNRWA is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East and it was formed after 1949. There was also a second work camp in Ramallah where foreign students assisted local students in the reconstruction of a school.

I stayed three nights in the Girls' Friends School in Ramallah. The Ramallah Friends School is a co-educational boarding school operated under the auspices of Friends United Meeting (FUM) in the USA. It was a well-known and successful school drawing from several Arab countries in the Near East. It had been under Jordanian rule, but after 1967 it came under Israeli occupied rule. In 1972 it was in severe jeopardy as the former students could no longer come back to the school.) I went to meet the head master and mistress of the school, who were evangelical Friends, in their

home. I was also invited to the home of one of the Arab students in Ramallah. We sat in the living room and were offered tea. Arab tea is served in glasses on a tray with mint and lots of sugar. I learned two phrases in Arabic: "*yallah!*" which means hurry up which was useful to keep the Arab girls from the summer camp moving in the direction we wanted and "*chai bedoun sucre*" "tea with out sugar".

Walking with Margot from a visit back to the school where we were staying, an Arab man grabbed me from behind. I screamed loudly and he let go of me. I was quite frightened by this experience. I was a petite, blond woman in a country where women were dark complexioned and wore head scarves and, therefore, I stood out as a foreign woman. From this experience I learned to be more careful and not to be out after dusk.

The summer camp was held in a school just north of Ramallah in the hills surrounded by fig and olive groves. There was a fellaheen village nearby and we witnessed an Arab peasant wedding. We slept on the floor in the school rooms and, before putting down our bedding and in the morning, we had to do a sweep for scorpions.

There was a small swimming pool and the foreign counselors gave swimming lessons since we would uncover ourselves enough to wear a bathing suit. The pool was so small that the young girls barely got the opportunity to get wet. We did pottery on a wheel, painting, sports, exercises and roller skating, but the best activity was putting music on a record player and learning to belly dance. The little girls were naturals at the sexy moves and the foreigners were quite unable to get the belly movements quite right. Ululation accompanied these good times, was also used to call the girls together and was also a new thing for the foreigners to attempt to learn.

We went on several out trips on buses with all the girls, taking our lunches in picnic baskets. The teachers thought that the trips were important for all of us to provide an opportunity to get to know Palestine, but especially for the girls who were the next generation of Palestinians. We went north to



*Eve in the West Bank, Palestine, 1970.*

Nablus, looked over the Sea of Galilee and ate a picnic at Baniyas on the Golan Heights. We went to Jerusalem and walked up the Via Dolorosa, through the gates of old Jerusalem, through the Dome on the Rock, and the mosque next door, down the stairs past the Wailing Wall, through the maze of street of old Jerusalem and through the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. We saw that Jerusalem is a holy site for three of the great religions of the world. We visited Jericho and the archeological site of the Umayyad Palace and we visited Bethlehem and went into the Church of the Nativity. We could not go to Gaza. Whenever we got off the bus we formed a long line of counselors and girls. We had a picnic at Solomon's Pools.

The teachers discussed the future of Palestine. It was very interesting to hear what they had to say in the context of the reading I had done before I had arrived in Israel/Palestine. It was only five years since the Six Day War when Israel had annexed the West Bank and Gaza. One of the teachers had lost a brother crossing into the West Bank from Jordan. She was held in special regard by the teachers and the children in the camp. I was learning about how martyrdom (*ishtishhad*) is a

Palestinian identifier and important in the narrative of Palestinian society and identity. It is believed the martyrs achieve heroic status in death and their families are accorded special honors. The Palestinians have very long memories for injustices and history of a thousand years is talked about as though it was yesterday. What these teachers were talking about, however, was a developing and a more modern concept of the struggle and suffering of the Palestinians. The brother had died for the current Palestinian cause and his sacrifice would never be forgotten. As sister of a martyr the teacher had a special status in the eyes of the other camp counselors. Her brother had a special place in heaven. After 1972 this martyr concept of honour seems to have contributed to an increase in suicide bombings by Palestinians.

Hummus, a very simple version of ground chickpeas, olives, stored in large vats under the kitchen, and flat bread were the staple foods at the camp. One day we had a visit from UNRWA officials who held their monthly meeting at the camp. Paul Johnson, an American Quaker who had been in Gaza in 1949 doing relief work with forty other young Friends, was also there. He was much respected. For this visit of the officials we made a more elegant feast of Middle Eastern foods such as stuffed eggplant and peppers. After eating the men sat together and smoked their water pipes.

At the end of the camp for girls, all the foreign students who had participated in the two work camps met for a few days for a seminar in Jerusalem. We also met some Israeli students who were pacifists. We toured Tel Aviv and the Jewish areas. I saw the Knesset. I was impressed by the ugliness, dirt and lack of civic pride everywhere in the Jewish areas.

I went to the synagogue at the Hadassah Medical Center which has incredibly beautiful stained glass windows by Marc Chagall. It was like a bright jewel in the dusty, ugly landscape. We went on a trip to Haifa and swam in the Mediterranean and a trip to the Dead Sea and covered ourselves in mud and floated in the very much saltier water of the Dead Sea. We visited the Holocaust Memorial to

commemorate the recent atrocities in Europe during World War Two perpetrated by the National Socialists (Nazis) on the Jews. The events were graphically displayed and there was a memorial area in a darkened room lit by a flickering flame.

On my way home through London, England, while I was travelling on the Underground, I heard about the September massacres in Munich at the Olympic Games. It was a horrifying ending to my visit.

Young Friends today do not have the experience of international work camps organized by Quakers. In the early 1970s the American Friends Service Committee decided that work camps were not a good thing. The “hands on” approach to service and exposure to Quaker faith in action by young Friends was deemed ineffective and a waste of time and money. Quaker service organizations today are much more involved in policy and policy statements in response to crisis and concerns. Many young participants in international Quaker work camps organized in the past have gone on to do very important service work domestically and internationally.

The Quaker international work camp in Israel/Palestine that I participated in 1972 as a twenty-one year old left a series of vivid impressions that have stayed with me all my life. They have coloured my understanding of people and awareness of how difficult it is to achieve peaceful co-existence. We must never take for granted the peaceful, democratic and multi-cultural society that we have forged in Canada. It is not perfect but what we have achieved is something to be thankful for and we have a responsibility to work hard to keep it viable.