

Palestine: The Olive Picker

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When Bristol, U.K., based, Ed Hill's elderly mother persuaded him to accompany her on a 'Holy Land Tour', as a committed atheist, he was underwhelmed. He returned from Palestine a changed man, in love with the place and people, enraged at their plight. He joined solidarity movements, campaigned and with Bristol Palestine Solidarity Campaign helped raise money for an orphanage in the northern town of Tulkarm, to which Bristol mosques contributed generously. Then Palestine's life blood, olives, touched his heart. He had learned of olive groves, some over a hundred years old, bulldozed by the Israelis. Then he heard of the Zaytoun Co-operative, formed by a group who put their scant savings, student loans, unemployment money, to export olive oil to the U.K. He started selling Zaytoun's oils and the project became a passion: 'I had crossed the line, I became a Zaytoun Zealot!', says Hill.

Last year, Zaytoun organized an olive harvest trip. Farming families now depend almost entirely on their land for survival and the olive harvest has anyway, ever been one of the year's key events for every Palestinian villager. Now Israeli settlers and soldiers harass, attack and deter villagers traveling by cart, donkey and battered pick-up, armed just with tarpaulins and blankets, to catch the olives as they fall – and whatever celebratory picnic they can afford, at a time celebrated over millennia. Zaytoun had decided to ask those from other countries for the occasion in the hope that, as with the 'internationals' that travel with ambulances, there might be less harassment. Hill needed no urging, but, he says, a lot of advice on convincing the Israeli authorities to let him in and persuade them of his reasons for visiting Palestine. Ironically this self confessed non-believer, now on a different kind of 'Holy Land Tour', decided that donning a large cross and declaring himself a born again Christian would be convincing. It worked.

In the old city of Jerusalem, where Zaytoun had arranged to meet their guests, he quickly discovered reality under occupation. Walking through Damascus Gate and : 'suddenly in a mediaeval maze of narrow streets and alleyways', he encountered a: 'gang of incredibly young, arrogant and undisciplined Israeli soldiers', and was struck by how big their guns were. Later he learned that someone had thrown a stone at soldiers in the area that day, who had exacted revenge by: 'throwing sound grenades into groups of school children, injuring some.' And he discovered the Separation Wall: 'As tall as a house', being built to separate Israel from Palestine, separating families, farmers from their land and destroying swathes of ancient citrus orchards, figs, olives. ' The apartheid system from South Africa, is being perfected in the West Bank', concludes Hill.

Traveling to the first picking venue, the town of As Sawiya: 'We passed the settlement town of Ariel, with swimming pool, fountains, lawns with sprinklers. The water comes from aquifers under the West Bank, supplied cheaply to settlers – the Palestinians have to buy

their own water back at inflated prices – and rationed so that on average they only get half the U.N. (considered adequate) quota.’ Below Ariel, is the little town of Marda, the wall snaking round, looking likely to completely maroon it. Settlers, learned Hill, from the Head Mistress of a girls high school, sometimes come in to the school, attack students, break windows and furniture, steal computers and also block children from getting to school. Teachers are turned back at checkpoints. The Head Mistress described a pregnant woman at one, who had become so distressed she had struck a soldier – who shot her and left her to bleed to death. ‘Between September 2000 and December 2004, sixty one women gave birth at checkpoints, thirty six babies died as a result, according to the UN’, says Hill, adding : ‘Near Jenin, Israeli soldiers even forced residents to undress at a roadblock.’

As Sawiya (population two thousand) had lost twenty eight percent of its farm land to the illegal settlement of Eli and farmers have been attacked, says Hill, with sticks, guns and dogs. Fields of fruit have had to be abandoned. Hill’s group, with the enduringly courageous Rabbis for Human Rights: ‘Provided protection so the villagers could gather at least one more harvest. Olive picking is convivial, with teams working on each tree, the blankets and tarpaulins spread to catch the handfuls of olives, pulled from the branches.’ Later, tablecloths are spread on the ground and “eat, eat” urge the hosts, “you are our guests”, as pita bread, hummus, olives, diced cucumbers and tomatoes are spread out.’ Hill talks of the ‘privilege’ he feels at knowing these extraordinarily resilient people, who have lost and suffered so much. ‘Aren’t you angry’ he asked one man who had lost swathes of land : ‘Anger is for mad people’, he replied : ‘All we want is to live in peace.’

After As Sawiya, Hill’s group moved on to Mada, a village originally with about ten thousand dunums of land. ‘The Ariel settlement stole three thousand, the Wall took a further eight hundred – and three thousand olive trees – and a highway will take more. Further, all exits except one have been closed off, which the Israelis seal at will, sometimes for days. Farmers cannot get to their land children their schools. It was possibly the last harvest before the Wall completely enclosed the land’. comments Hill. (At Anata School in Jerusalem, this obscene apartheid symbol, goes straight through the playground, he discovered.)

Currently, Hill is back in Mada and presented his eighty minute documentary ‘Our Sufferings in this Land’, filmed throughout last year’s visit, to the Mayor, Sadeq Kufash. ‘The Wall is now complete’, says Hill: ‘When the gate is closed, fields just across the road cannot be reached, this little town is ghettoized. People rely entirely on their land and their olives. There are nightly raids between midnight and dawn by Israeli soldiers. On 6th November they raided the house of a women psychologist, asleep with her children aged three and one and her mother. They held them at gunpoint in the garden for an hour. A fourteen year old boy was arrested for going near the wall.’ During one late night attack, the word went round the village: “ring for the olive pickers.” ‘Last Friday’, Hill continues: ‘Israeli soldiers attacked the olive harvesters, when we, the internationals tried to intervene, one soldier said: “The only good Arab is a dead Arab.” ‘

‘This regular attrition against the ordinary people of Palestine never reaches the main stream media. This little town has done no harm to anyone. But it is obvious the nearby settlement wants to drive the people out and eventually bulldoze their town to grab the land and resources. I think it is criminal and I want the world to know about it,’ he says, adding, that when he saw their plight: ‘I felt like crying.’

Hill seeks donations for computers and cameras for schools. Details and for his video and informative, resource packed booklet : ‘Bristol to Tulkarm’ :

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