

# Letters from Palestine

2013-05-06 - *Painting in Palestine*

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Dear Friends,



I hope this letter finds you enjoying a wonderful May weekend. After reflecting on only two weeks in Palestine I recognize that I have been feeling various emotions very strongly upon hearing stories of life for these people. Anger, admiration, fear, joy, disgust, and delight are some of the emotions that immediately come to mind. I enjoy sharing these reports with you because I am here alone and each day I independently move throughout this area near Bethlehem from homes to NGOs to farm fields and city squares, all in

my search to learn as much as I can in my one-month trip and to find sights to document with my pencil and paintbrush. Yes, I am making artwork this month! In my previous email I have mentioned that I came here on a grant from a tax resisters' escrow fund which I applied for through the Western Carolinians for Peace and Justice in the Middle East (WCPJME). The main goal I am looking to achieve with the grant money is to produce artwork which WCPJME and I can use to share stories with people in North Carolina and other parts of the world about the lives of Palestinians under Israeli occupation.



Also, I am teaching some drawing classes while here. I have set up a series of four classes with seven people at Rafiq Addab—a center for people with physical disabilities—which will start in a few days, and there will also be classes at Alrowad, a cultural center in Aida refugee camp.

In an effort to document some of the information I am gathering, I will share with you some stories from my painting excursions. Here are the titles of the stories:

1. House surrounded by the apartheid wall on three sides
2. Battir—ancient village facing destruction of agricultural heritage
3. Mar Saba Monastery dating back to fourth century

## House surrounded by the apartheid wall on three sides:

One day about a week ago I met up with a German guy named Andreas who was interested in helping me find a place to paint near the apartheid wall in Bethlehem. As we walked along the wall, I was amazed to see incredible amounts of creative messaging towards peace and justice which people from several countries have painted on the wall. I attached just a couple pictures of the multitudes of these powerful images. Andreas and I found a spot for me to paint in front of a home where we were greeted by Arlette, the mother of one of the families living there. Arlette shared a bit about the history of that place. In the latter part of the 20th century, Arlette's home was in the middle of one of the busiest, biggest, and most prosperous sections of Bethlehem, located along the road linking Bethlehem, Hebron and Jerusalem. In the years 2000 to 2003 the Israeli army took the family's land surrounding the building without compensation, destroyed four family shops, turned the area into an military base and erected first a temporary wall, and then the current apartheid wall. In 2002, the army put up blocks on three sides of the house which "caged" the family inside the house. Once or twice per week the army gave the family members inside only one hour to go out and buy what they needed. Though there was active fighting and shooting happening just outside the home, Arlette's family chose to stay in their house with five children for fear that if they left they would lose their home completely. Also starting in 2002, Israeli army soldiers crashed into the home during the middle of the night and order all of the family members to go outside so that they could search the home for weapons. The soldiers did this once per month when they were changing shifts throughout one year. One day in December of 2003 the army used heavy equipment to dig around the house on three sides and then erected the 20-meter high concrete structure. Arlette said, "My kids went to school in the morning and when they came home the wall was there." In response to the wall, Arlette's daughter said, "Mom, they buried us alive." All of the family members are still living but they all deal with the after-effects of going through this psychological trauma. I have attached a picture of my unfinished watercolor painting of the house with the apartheid wall right next to it.



## Battir—ancient village facing destruction of agricultural heritage



I also went to Battir village in search of a place to paint. I knew of Battir even before I came to Palestine because I saw a video on Aljazeera about how the ancient village is being considered by the UN for World Heritage Status. See: I wrote in a previous email of my visit to Battir with Mazin Qumseyah and a Swedish group. Mazin took us all there to show us where the Israelis in 1967 took much farmland which Battir villagers formerly cultivated; Mazin also pointed out to us where the Israeli government is proposing to destroy much more farmland, including ancient, unique terraces of grain and vegetable fields and olive groves, in order to build the apartheid wall right through the village. (Many people I have talked with have mentioned that the purpose of the wall is more for intimidation and destruction of Palestinian homes and property than for achieving any sort of real separation between the Israel and Palestine. The Israeli government has not used its deep pockets of money to prioritize a thorough completion of the wall; there are many breaks

in it where people can move back and forth quite freely. If Israel were truly interested in the wall being a barrier to movement, they could have accomplished this long ago. Rather, the wall is being constructed in places which deliberately destroy the lives of Palestinians in many ways.)

Last week while I was at a dinner party for a band from France called Barrio Populo, I was talking about Battir village to my Palestinian friend and tour guide, Hijazi Eld. Hijazi told me his friend Omar is a taxi driver from Battir. That night Omar offered not only to drive me to Battir, but also to put me up at his family's home! Yesterday I returned from a wonderful couple of days in Battir with Omar's family, including his wife and six children—five daughters and one son. His oldest daughter is in school in Philadelphia and his next oldest daughter did excellent



translating for all of us during my visit. In order to get a good view—while standing in the shade—of the agricultural terraces which are slated for destruction for the purposes of the insane apartheid wall, I stood next to an irrigation canal which is part of the ancient water system. To get to this site, I walked by the old communal bath house and bathing pool, no longer in use but quite stirring to the imagination. I enjoyed picturing the scene in my mind of people bathing in that beautiful pool fed by a clean, cold spring water waterfall. While I was sketching the composition before painting it, a couple of men walked by from Palestinian TV. They asked to tape me for a minute. They asked me a couple of

questions and that night I was on TV after the host said something about how so many people are against the building of the wall in Battir; even this foreigner is going to paint Battir as it is now as part of her effort to tell others she opposes the wall's construction.

After the afternoon painting I had a wonderful dinner with Omar's family and the next morning after breakfast three of the kids—aged 4, 7 and 9--excitedly modeled for me. The unfinished drawing is attached.



### **Mar Saba Monastery**

As I am running out of time to write, I will just mention that the other day I was fortunate to go to Mar Saba monastery which dates back to the Byzantine period, in the fourth century. This is an amazingly beautiful place. But because it is just downstream from Jerusalem, the stream running below the monastery is full of sewage and other waste from the large city which creates a terrible stench and destroys much life around the stream. This senseless destruction of the stream is an abomination.

### **Administrative Detention Video**

In my other email I discussed a conference on Palestinian political prisoners. See this recent video for more information:

[http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=767&Itemid=74&jumival=10153](http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=767&Itemid=74&jumival=10153)

hugs,

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