

HOLY LAND MISSIONS REPORT -APRIL 2005

by Nancy Murray

For our mission trip to Israel, my husband Bill and I found that the cheapest tickets to be had were on the Polish Airlines, LOT, although it meant traveling by way of Warsaw where we had a fourteen hour layover. During the long layover, we took a tour of the city, much of which has actually been reconstructed after having been destroyed by the bombing in World War II. On the tour, we visited the site of the Warsaw Ghetto, where several hundred thousand Jews were confined and starved to death by the Nazi invaders. It was also the site of the only real armed resistance put up by the Jews against the Nazi army. Today, a large monument tells about the courage of those who resisted, and also about individuals in the Polish underground who were able to rescue some of the Jewish children. Reflecting on those dark days of the Holocaust, we were reminded that today, the Jewish state of Israel finds itself under siege also, surrounded this time by Muslim enemies who plot its destruction.

Unlike Bill, who has traveled to Israel several times over the past few years, I had not been there since my first and only trip back in 1993. That was before the intifada began, and crowds of tourists were at all the historic biblical sites. This time, I saw many dramatic changes from those days. I don't have space to report on all we did and saw, so I have chosen to tell about three of the main ministries the RFC supports in the Holy land.

ARIEL: OUTPOST OF CIVILIZATION ON THE WILD FRONTIER

Leaving the airport and the modern city of Tel Aviv, Bill and I drove out through the rugged, rocky hills of Samaria toward the city of Ariel, and were soon in Area B. Although this part of Israel is controlled by the Israeli army, known as the IDF, the Palestinian Authority police have authority in the Arab villages, and that is why Muslim converts to Christianity have been thrown into PA jails and tortured (usually on charges of being a "traitor" or spy for Israel). You can see for many miles across the hills, barren except for the sparse grass and low growing olive trees. Unlike in the United States, there are no businesses along the highway, and no isolated houses. Everyone lives clustered together in one of the villages you can see from the road, like fortresses on the hilltops. The Jewish settlements are white stone apartment houses which you can quickly identify by their red tile roofs. Each one has an army checkpoint at its entrance. The Arab villages consist of white stone buildings, but without red tile roofs and without checkpoints to enter.

After about thirty miles, we turned down the entrance road to Ariel, by far the biggest settlement. We passed by a hotel, gas station and supermarket which are outside the army checkpoint and thus unprotected. During the intifada, both the hotel and the gas station were bombed, but as with many sites in Israel, the blood has been cleaned away, the buildings repaired, and people try to go on about their business as usual. A private guard with an automatic rifle now patrols the small complex.



Leah and David Ortiz, Tiqvah, (who is Chinese - Jewish) Nancy and William Murray

Our destination was the apartment of David and Leah Ortiz, who have been ministering and witnessing in Ariel for some twenty years. As the parents of five sons and a daughter, David and Leah live daily with the knowledge that one or more of their children is on some hazardous mission with the army. Immediately after high school graduation, all Israeli teenagers, both boys and girls, must begin three years of mandatory, grueling service with the IDF. When the Ortiz family first settled in Ariel, some of their Jewish neighbors tried to drive them out because of their Christian witnessing, but were unsuccessful. Gradually, with patience and loving persistence, they have won acceptance by most residents in Ariel and have led some to faith in Yeshua. Their ministry has another apartment in

the same complex, where Christians visiting in the area can stay, and it is also used for prayer meetings and Bible studies for children and adults. This is where Bill and I stayed for the entire week. At the prayer meetings, we met some of the Jewish neighbors, both believers and seekers, as well as Christians from America and Spain. At one meeting, Mohammed, one of the Palestinian converts, came over in his work overalls from his construction job in town. He was suffering nerve damage from injuries caused by the PA jailers, and wanted prayer for healing. All the men laid hands on him, and we all prayed for his healing and protection. Afterward, tears were streaming down his face, as he was moved by the care and concern of Israelis and Americans, people he had always been taught were his enemies.

Arab men from the surrounding villages, if they have a clean record, can travel into Tel Aviv, Ariel, or other towns to work. Many work in the factories at the edge of Ariel, or do yard work or construction there. The women, though, lead a life confined at home, forbidden from going to school as girls, and rarely ever getting to leave their own village in adult life. David and Leah once took a woman and her children from one of these villages to the beach at Tel Aviv. They had never seen the ocean, although it was only thirty miles away.

David drove Bill and me out to some of the Palestinian Muslim villages, to places few outsiders ever see. After all, there is really nothing very attractive to come here for--no nice stores or restaurants--maybe a local coffee shop for men only, and a small outdoor market. Mostly there are narrow, littered streets and suspicious, hostile stares and a sense that everyone is watching and listening. There is no reason to come here, unless you are looking for lost souls to bring to Yeshua, as David has done for so many years at great danger to himself.

So far, the worst he has received is a beating and several death threats. David, Bill and I did have some protection since if we got into trouble the IDF would come in to try and rescue us (although they wouldn't be very pleased about it, thinking we never should have been there in the first place.) Muslim converts to Christianity don't have even that limited sense of protection because the Israeli army doesn't interfere in the affairs of Palestinians. If a former Muslim who becomes a believer is killed, it will never be investigated by the PA police. It is hard to imagine the kind of courage it takes day by day to be a believer in such a place.

BEIT JALA: CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN THE PATH OF ISLAM

The next day, David drove Bill and me to the village of Beit Jala which adjoins Bethlehem, just outside of Jerusalem. We went there to visit Hope School, which the RFC has supported for several years. Started in 1961 by the Mennonites, Hope School now has 124 students, mostly boys, in grades 6 through 12. Besides the day students from the surrounding communities, there are poor and homeless kids who live here full time. Things have changed greatly for the school since they came under the authority of the PA. They are on the edge of Beit Jala, administratively under PA control. Although this is an ancient Christian community, with nice homes and churches and many families who can trace their roots back hundreds of years, they are basically in the same situation as the Arabs out in the primitive Muslim villages. They are not Israeli citizens so they are completely under the thumb of the Palestinian Authority.

As soon as you drive through the entrance to Hope School, past the heavy metal gate which can be operated from inside the building, and see the metal bars on the windows, you know you are in a place under siege. That impression was confirmed inside the school, where we greeted the headmaster, Solomon Nour, who was very glad we had come, but who was obviously very troubled. He has worked at this school for over thirty years, first as a teacher and then as headmaster. His only daughter works here also, as an English teacher. Solomon took us, in his battered old car which can barely struggle up the steep village hills, to his home to meet his family. We had to go through the checkpoint manned by PA soldiers into Area A. Like nearby Bethlehem, this part of Beit Jala is totally under PA control. Solomon's wife died two years ago, and

he has moved in with his two sisters and their families. Because of tradition as well as hard economic times, many Christian homes here have several generations living under the same roof. In the well kept living room, we were served strong coffee and oranges. Once they became convinced that it was safe to talk to us, the family told us what has been happening to people in their community, the threats and the violent incidents which are never even investigated by the PA. Many have already moved away, but the only way to do that is to sell one's home to a Muslim. Selling to another Christian means accepting perhaps half as much money and so not having enough to leave.

Solomon also took us to the Church of the Nativity, less than a mile away, and dropped us off for a short visit. We were met at the door by a Palestinian policeman who wanted to know what country we were from and how we got to the church. We told him a friend dropped us off, but of course we did not tell him Solomon's name. Back at the school, we met the rest of the staff. As we learned more about the true situation here, we wondered how they could continue to teach under these conditions. Much like in the old Soviet Union, there is religious freedom on paper, in the PA Constitution, but in reality that is not the case. The school is being forced to take more Muslim students than they can really accommodate. Christian students are still a two thirds majority, but the school is being forced to use the same textbooks as the public schools (which are by the way very inferior academically). Teachers are of course unwilling to teach verses from the Koran, but there is always the threat that some of the Muslim students will tell their parents that the verses were skipped and the teachers will be in trouble with the authorities. The only place they are allowed to be totally open about their faith is in the chapel service which begins each day. The chapel was by far the most beautifully decorated room in the school.

There is just the feel here of having been abandoned. Many of the Christian groups that used to send support are now out practicing "inoffensive" charity with the Muslims--hoping to win them over with good works without presenting the "offense" of the Gospel. Next to the school, in a beautiful spot overlooking the valley, there is another building with an apartment for the volunteer Christian workers who used to come and give their time ministering to the students. Solomon did not show us inside--it is clearly in disuse and I don't think anyone has been here since the PA took over.

The only certainty about the future of this school is that it is uncertain. Less than a mile away, the Wall the Israelis are building is moving toward them. If the school winds up on the Israeli side, they will have freedom to practice their religion and protection by law. However, many of the students will then live on the PA side, and no one can say how many parents would be willing to face going through the checkpoints twice each day to bring their children, or what repercussions the families might face for going into Israel. If the school winds up on the PA side, I really don't know how it can survive. Some might say it's time to walk away and time for the Christians to just get out. But most of the youngsters of Hope School are from poor families--if they even have families. They cannot move, and if the school closes they will be exposed to nothing but hateful Muslim propaganda. I cannot see how we can abandon them.

TEL AVIV: BELIEVERS WORSHIP IN A FREE CITY

On the last day, Bill and I drove back to Tel Aviv, which of course is totally in Israeli control. Tel Aviv is much like any large American or European city, with beautiful modern buildings, crowded stores and restaurants, and streets full of traffic. As in America or Europe, here the rule of law prevails. Whether you are an Israeli citizen, a visiting Christian tourist, a Muslim Arab, or a foreign worker-- if anyone tries to physically attack you or steal your property, you can expect the police to come to your assistance and the courts to equally enforce the laws. So, although people are still nervous from the terrorist bombings, there is still generally a feeling of freedom and safety not found in the PA controlled areas.

On one of the busy side streets of Tel Aviv, a large three story building called Esther House is home to five different Christian congregations as well as an outreach center with a coffee bar and live music, where



Bill and Saeed with soap made by his family in Samaria

curious or interested people can walk in off the street and find out about Jesus, or Yeshua, as the believers here call him. One of the largest congregations, Adonai Roi, is led by Pastor Avi Mizrachi, an Israeli born Jew who traveled to the U.S. several years ago as a young man just out of the army, and was saved while visiting a Baptist church in Florida. He and his wife Chaya, an American, came back to Israel to live and to minister in this Messianic Jewish congregation in Tel Aviv. Bill and I attended a Shabbat, or Sabbath service, and it was a joyful, spirit filled time of singing and praising the Lord, teaching the Scriptures, praying and giving testimonies. At the service, Israeli Jewish believers worshipped alongside Christian visitors from several different countries as well as foreign workers from Singapore, and everyone was welcomed. We sat beside our friend Saeed, who regularly worships here. He is one of the Palestinians who has had

to flee his village and whose wife makes some of the olive oil soap which our ministry sells in the United States.

Although this is a dynamic congregation with freedom to practice their faith, they are not without their own problems. Avi and some of the other young parents told us in a long discussion about their concerns for their children and their dream of starting a Christian school. Although Jewish Christians in Israel are not under persecution, they certainly are subject to social disapproval and rejection by their Jewish neighbors. This can be especially difficult for their youngsters. Also, Israeli society is being bombarded by some of the same kinds of immoral television, movie and Internet influences we have in the U.S. The Tel Aviv believers want their children to have a Christian education and to be protected from harmful social influences, but face some difficulties in that most Israeli parents don't earn very high salaries and can't afford much in tuition. Bill has a lot of experience with raising money for Christian schools in the U.S., but the situation is completely different in Israel. There, you won't find local businessmen eager to support a Christian school; instead of being respected for it in the community, they might well find themselves boycotted.

There seem to be so many needs among the believers here--both Israelis and Palestinians, and not many resources with which to help them. But we are also uplifted by the courage and faith we have witnessed, and we know that God is at work here in a mighty way.

CONCLUSION

These were only some "snapshots" of all we did during the week. Unfortunately, some of the things we did and people we met with cannot at this time be discussed, because this report will be on the Internet, and we do not want to compromise the safety of believers who live under constant threat of death or imprisonment. One project I can tell you about, though, is that we have been trying to find something the Palestinian believers can make and sell in the United States (besides the olive oil soap), with the rather primitive technical capabilities they have at hand. Please pray for the survival and protection of these people, and that God will bring many more of the Palestinians to faith in Christ.

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