

THISTLES IN THE VINEYARD

A Diary from Palestine

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excerpts translated by Nancy du Plessis

June 2006

11 June

Today, on my fifty-eighth birthday, I'm starting this diary in order to report on my life in Palestine over the next nine months.

It is summer now and the splendor of spring is long gone. But it's colorful and beautiful in other ways: the green of the olive trees, the gold of the sheaves of wheat, the brown of the earth and the light-colored stones scattered between fragrant plants of thyme reflect the mosaic that is Palestine. To celebrate my birthday we walk through the olive grove to the *kasr*—a massive round construction made of stone—and enjoy just being together in nature, drinking sage-and-peppermint tea, recalling our hike in spring, and contemplating how our *kasr* came to be.

In April, my husband Munir, our son Anis, our daughters Ghada and Hala, and I had gone hiking over hill and dale. Anemone, broom, cyclamen, wild tulips, lilies and orchids, along with wild roses, climbing plants and creepers, ornamented the green of the landscape. We fanned out, examining the great variety of living things. We searched for the wild asparagus that hides in the undergrowth of prickly berries and creepers, and got scratched and pricked by thorns. We were happy to see asparagus heads looming in our path, as if they had been waiting for us. We rejoiced and gathered as many as we could, then compared our bouquets.

Later, we arrived at Bir Zeit's big garbage dump. Throughout the country, untreated waste is just dumped outside villages, and construction site rubble is deposited along roadsides. Houses are now being built ever closer to dumps.

The rubbish was scattered around in heaps. Smoke and the stench of decay nearly took our breath away. Covering our faces, we held our breath, screwed up our eyes and hurriedly but carefully climbed over the mounds in order to put the garbage landscape behind us as quickly as possible. We just wanted to see nature's beauty!

We arrived at the vineyard of my grandfather, Ibrahim. Today, olive trees grow there. I searched in vain for the old Saint-John's-bread tree where once we packed wine grapes to be sold in crates and under whose branches we'd relaxed—and was forced to recognize that it had been chopped down. I remembered how Grandmother Miriam cooked fresh vegetables in a clay pot

on the wood fire and baked pita bread. She also minded the goats and prepared fresh cheese and yogurt from their milk.

In this vineyard stand the ruins of a *kasr* that had belonged to Regina, my grandmother's sister. We crawled inside and sat on the rocky floor, studying the vault built of layers of stone that support each other on the sides and top, without any mortar: a work of art from an earlier age. We caressed the stones with great respect, feeling the nearness of their effort and their souls. We felt a great bond to the family over the generations.

Right nearby is a Roman ruin. We inspected the large site of collapsed walls where we can still make out the various rooms and passageways. Cisterns for collecting rainwater suggest it had been necessary to provide for a large number of people. Deep grooves in the rocks connect the spots for stomping and pressing the wine grapes to the storage basin.

It was hot, and walking and climbing on the crumbling ruins was tiring. We wanted to return to the ruin of the *kasr*, but the colorful mosaic stones and broken bits of glass and potsherds that lay scattered everywhere held us back. We found lots of pretty stones, both small and large. The bits of mosaic glued together with phosphate of lime were the most beautiful. Massive columns and entranceways lay on the ground between acanthus thistles. A once-flourishing culture was apparent. It accosted us.

A farmer had planted wheat in the fertile soil among the debris of the Roman ruins. Spikes of wheat—with splendid pink and lilac lilies between them—grew abundantly. Walking there, Hala nearly disappeared from view. In the soft breeze, Hala, the wheat spikes and the lilies all seemed to move like waves in a sea of plants. Then we climbed on the *kasr*. From its top we could see far into the distance and observe movement on the road to Nablus that snakes through the valley. We sat without speaking, smiling to ourselves and enjoying the stillness. From the ruins of the past, new cultures could be created today and tomorrow. We only have to want it—and it must just be permitted.

We picked thyme, wild peppermint, sage and wild vegetables to enjoy at home in salad or boiled or baked in food wraps. How wonderful it is to rest after an exhausting hike!

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12 June

As I do every day, today I skimmed the newspaper. There was nothing in it to refresh the heart—only sad, horrific news, such as the report on the Israeli air attack on the beach of Gaza:

Eleven-year-old Huda Ghalia survived, but her whole family was killed on the beach: Ali Ghalia (45), Raifa Ghalia (26), Alia Ghalia (25), Ilham (7) Sabrin (3), Hanadi (2) and Haitham (1). On television yesterday I saw how Huda was crying next to her father's corpse, with the other corpses strewn in shreds around her.

I was sick. I couldn't read anything more, or watch or listen. I think that for a brief moment, outrage and sadness prevail. But what will become of that traumatized child? Who will

take care of Huda? Israel issues regrets, but never goes so far as to apologize, because that would mean accepting responsibility.

For this reason, Israel never apologizes, as a matter of principle. This first enrages and infuriates many Palestinians, and then it is expressed in hatred and more violence.

I didn't feel like doing anything. I cleaned the apartment and went into the village to go shopping. There I found everything I wanted except fresh tomatoes and eggplant. No problem, I told myself, today we'll eat *mudjaddara*, our rice and lentil dish made with burnt onions, and yogurt. I had just gotten home when I heard the vegetable man calling out from his truck. I yelled loudly to him from the veranda and as usual, he looked up and waved at me. He seemed to understand. I went down to the street quickly. He had lots of fresh vegetables that pleased me. I bought vegetables and fruit to last the whole week. Ahmad carried my purchases up the thirty-nine steps and set them before the kitchen door at the rear entrance. He enthusiastically talked about his first daughter and his wife, who'd stalwartly made it through the birth. I congratulated him and wished him well, and gave him a bag of chocolates for the family and a few bars of soap for his wife. Then I cooked eggplant with chopped meat, tomatoes, onions and rice.

I brought food to my eighty-year-old mother who lives nearby and stayed with her for an hour. I was back home around two, in time to eat with my family.

13 June

I just couldn't leave it alone: I read the newspaper today, too. Another bloody night in Gaza: two dead and fifteen wounded in Rafah, including three children, in a shoot-out between President Abbas's police and the Hamas Government security forces. Masked men had forced their way into the Parliament building, battered doors and smashed windows, trashed furniture and office equipment and set fire to other public buildings. A Fatah representative was kidnapped— following the abduction of Hamas people.

In order to cope, I turned my attention to my duties and responsibilities.

Today, the seminar for women in Dair Ibsi started again, after a break of many weeks while the children took their school exams. The women reported about their experiences and what's on their minds. Suzan and Nida didn't come back. With their five-member families, they have gone to the USA. So our seminar was about forced emigration. We discovered that Hadil and Samar have also applied to emigrate with their families. They said, "Life here is no longer bearable. There's no income, no protection, no future." Samar is a secretary at the university and earns three hundred dollars a month. Her husband sells tiles and stone for construction. But for three years there's been hardly any work and his business has folded. The building industry—like most other branches of business—is at a low point. There is no money and nobody will risk investing. Without support from her family in the USA, Samar would barely have survived. Her

home was near the “Atara” checkpoint where military jeeps and tanks are constantly passing by. Very often, there’s shooting. She fears for her three children.

Hadil is a housewife. Her husband has been unemployed for three years. We have neither support for the jobless nor welfare or health insurance here because we have no State. When Hadil’s family has nothing to eat, they have to wait until their in-laws invite them for a meal. They have many debts and don’t know how to manage any longer. That’s why they’re leaving the country. In Israel, that’s called “human transfer”. “They only need to make life hard for people, and then they go voluntarily,” said Hadil.

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1 September 2006

The new school year starts today. But all the public schools are on strike. For that reason, my seminar with the girls at the Beit-Ijsa School has been cancelled.

The first four months of this year I regularly conducted more than twenty meetings there.

Three hundred and fifty high-school students from six villages west of Jerusalem attend the Beit-Ijsa School. Their villages have been completely neglected for more than thirty-five years. The roads are in very bad shape and may not be repaired. The villages are surrounded by the Wall; the villagers feel like they’re in prison. They are cut off from their fields, are not permitted to go cultivate them and as a result, are impoverished. The director of the school was pleased with my proposal to conduct a training program there. The education authority granted permission surprisingly fast. More than thirty of the pupils are already married, and many of them have children. Specialized meetings with the mothers and one-on-one counseling have become part of my job. The young women's determination to continue their schooling despite their growing responsibilities shows their will to learn: some mothers have decided to study for their high-school diplomas after eight years of marriage and three or more children. They come to the school for private tutoring. The school director keeps the building open until evening, and the teachers provide tuition for free.

The trip from Bir Zeit to Beit Ijsa used to last forty minutes. Today I need nearly two hours because I have to switch taxis six times and often must walk a few hundred meters along rocky paths. In Palestine, private cars are only permitted within one's own city or residential area—never between villages. Getting to another place takes a lot of time, money and energy because street closings and prohibitions impede all movement. But each time I manage, I'm pleased to feel new inner strength. Can anyone imagine what an opportunity and a joy it is to be able to influence more than two hundred young women—and to feel how they affect me?

To begin with, it was important to win the confidence of the school administration, teachers and pupils. I suggested conducting at least six seminar sessions with each group so that we could learn their needs and wishes and develop the program together. It takes time to define

and put problems into words, and even more time and also courage to express feelings and wishes.

Telling about themselves encouraged the girls to be open about their problems and feelings. We're all enriched by an abundance of stories and experiences.

One clever hardworking girl wanted to speak with me privately. She talked about her family's poverty: Eight siblings and the parents live in two rooms. It's almost impossible to study. To help her, the rest of the family has tried sitting quietly in one room, but they feel trapped there and can't hold out for more than an hour. They are so poor that sometimes they go to bed without eating. A meal often consists of bread dunked in thyme and olive oil. She often doesn't have even a shekel for the bus and has to miss class. Because she's the oldest daughter, the family has great expectations of her: they hope she'll learn a profession and lift them out of poverty.

All the schoolgirls and teachers at Beit-Ijsa School are Muslim. Only after the first eight semesters did the pupils realize that I'm Christian. I said, "When we're in dire straits and feel scared, it's good to reflect on our deepest beliefs in order to find help and strength—whether we're Muslim, Christian or Jew. Believers find consolation and a way through prayer. Those who don't believe in God or doubt God exists can also try this because God is there for them, too. In any case, it can't hurt—and you might feel peace and comfort."

"Do you pray five times a day?" one of the schoolgirls asked.

"No, sometimes I pray once—sometimes many times—a day, and sometimes only once a week, or once a month."

"But you have to pray five times a day and each time, before you pray, you have to wash. Don't you wash?"

"That's what Muslims have to do."

"Aren't you Muslim?"

"No, I'm Christian."

"Oh, that's too bad! That explains why you're the only one not wearing a headscarf!"

"Sometimes when I want to and when it's necessary, I also wear a headscarf. Only recently has the headscarf come to signify Muslim women.

My mother is Christian but she always wears a scarf because it's part of her tradition. We must learn never to judge a person because of what he or she is wearing. It's not a pity that I'm not Muslim: it's nice that we're different. That's how God wanted it and we can find the good in that. We enrich each other. I don't have to wash before praying because what's most important is for me to be clean inside and have good intentions. I can pray wherever I am—in a taxi, on the street or in bed. I can talk to God constantly, praising and worshipping Him, imploring something from Him and thanking Him. That's my freedom. It's different—but neither better nor worse than your prayer and your relationship to our common God. Our God is pleased when we get along well: He wants that."

“I can't believe that you're Christian: What you teach us and what guides you is the essence of Islam.”

“Exactly: It's the heart of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Ninety percent of our basic beliefs are alike—our differences are minor. That's what's most interesting: we should understand that we complement each other. Let's accept our differences and respect them. That's what God wants.”

“How do you pray?”

“We pray much like you do.”

“Lead the prayers for us!”

We began to recite prayers, first the *Fatiha*, the first *sura* of the Koran, sentence for sentence. I prayed along with them:

“In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds, the Beneficent, the Merciful, owner of the Day of Judgment.

Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek. Show us the straight path, the path of those whom Thou has favored, not the path of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray.”

After each line I said, “That's part of my prayer, too. That corresponds to my Christian faith.”

Then I began to write “Our Father” on the board—sentence by sentence. After each sentence I asked, “Do you agree with its meaning? Could you also pray that?” They answered, “Yes”. Our encounter with the various prayers was a joy for all. We agreed to hold a seminar on the similarities among the religions. When I informed the school director and teachers about our plan, they said they hadn't realized that Christianity and Islam have so much in common. They had never thought about it and are very interested in addressing the subject.

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2 September

Two vines grow on our house. From their bountiful harvest, we make wine. The grapevine is called *karma* in Arabic, which means “generous in giving”.

The vines wrap themselves around the house and climb up to the roof where they spread out like a blanket. We love olive trees and grapevines: They mark the landscape and symbolize for us “home” and our connection to the land. They take modestly and give generously. We admire and love them; we tend them and sing their praises. We feel safe in their shade. They're part of our lives.

Unwaveringly and with great determination, the tenacious, rigid vines wind crooked and straight towards the sun. In autumn they're pruned so far back that they look dead. Then, in the dormant season, they gather strength to sprout shoots from the knots in all directions when spring comes. The branches seek their way, and the leaves grow, facing the sun. We prepare delicious meals—grape leaves stuffed with spiced meat and rice roulade or casseroles with layers

of grape leaves, spiced chopped meat, parsley and onions, covered with tomatoes and served with rice. The tart taste of fresh grape leaves rounds out the pleasure.

Hundreds of grapes hang from the branches, seeming to huddle together —or to push each other away. In summer, the vines form pretty shady arbors over the veranda on the south side and over the terrace on the west side, by the kitchen. Children and adults eat, read, work and play there. From the not-yet-ripe sour grapes we make grape juice, soft drinks and a sour liquid that substitutes for lemon in many dishes. Our harvest of ripe grapes is so plentiful that we give part of it to neighbors and friends with the saying: “Share the good of this year and every year”. Our bowls are emptied and returned, filled with the harvest from our neighbors' gardens. With the remaining grapes, we make wine at home. Our two vines yield more than a hundred liters of wine—for our own pleasure and for gift giving.

3 September

Yesterday there was a wedding and afterwards, a party in the garden of the church. Around eight in the evening we suddenly heard shots and screams.

The music was turned up so that the partygoers would hear as little as possible. Some of the men hurried away; they came back soon and began to bring the party slowly and discreetly to an end. The food was served early, the cake immediately thereafter, and the music was played at full volume. At 10 p.m., people began to offer the toasts—which usually start around midnight—and everyone went home quickly.

There had been a fight in Bir Zeit. The security forces had arrested a seventeen-year-old from the neighboring village for stealing a Vespa. Then his friends and relatives stormed the police station and threw stones and Molotov cocktails at stores, cars and residential buildings. The police were unable to stop them. Finally, guns were fired and an eighteen-year-old was shot dead. The residents all panicked, fearing revenge from the neighboring village. The police were held responsible for the death. Today the Governor of Ramallah, accompanied by more than fifteen men, went to the village of the dead young man. At least that many men were waiting for them. The traditional practice of *sulha* began. The governor proposed: The young man who'd been killed would be registered as a martyr and his parents would receive a monthly compensation the rest of their lives. In addition, four relatives of the deceased, imprisoned for criminal offenses, would be released. On top of that, he offered a one-time settlement of twenty thousand dollars. The family of the dead young man accepted the offer but demanded that a second session be held some months later before the reconciliation could be considered complete.

The practice of *sulha* protects the perpetrator and makes a business out of a dispute. It actually promotes conflicts—because those involved profit from it. It is a medieval system that continues to be used because the proper civil-legal system has collapsed.

4 September

Today I had a cordial meeting with my former student, Mo, after ten years. In the meantime he's become the father of two children and works in the office for food supply, where for months, like all employees, he's been paid only a fraction of his salary. He gives some of the little he has to his brother who is a journalist. His wife is a teacher. The teaching staff of the public schools has been on strike for weeks because they haven't been paid. So his wife has gone with the children to the village in order to share what little they have with the extended family and to support each other.

Mo is working on a dissertation about children forced to become collaborators. He gave me documents and reports to read, and together we watched a video about child collaborators who confessed their crimes during the interrogation and told how they'd become collaborators. It was heart-rending. Take the story of Ra, whose interrogation was taped by a Palestinian resistance group. In the film, only Ra was visible; we could only hear the voices of his interrogators. Ra was seventeen years old, with a handsome but pale face and eyes that were red from crying. His hands were restless, his back bent, his shoulders hunched. He sat on top of two stones, in front of a bare wall. I wanted to follow and remember every movement, to see every centimeter of his body, to understand. I wanted to perceive the person. Ra related:

“At thirteen, I was recruited by my own uncle, my mother's brother. My father had been shot during a dispute in the village. I felt I was done for because I'm the eldest of six. I was wrapped in sorrow, rage and worries about my family; I couldn't bear my impotence. My uncle was concerned and offered his help. I was grateful: I saw him as my savior. He said, “These criminals killed your father, they have no heart. If you want revenge, I'll help you. Here, take this cell phone. Follow these two people, observe where they go, whom they meet, their daily routine—and report back to me. I did what he said and now and again he gave me a card with units for the phone, and some money.

“How much money?”

“Twenty, sometimes fifty, shekels. I thought he was planning my revenge. Then, after a time, I called him and a strange voice answered: “I'm Captain Fu. From now on, I'm your only contact. Here are the names of three more people to look after. You'll get paid for every piece of information you provide. You need money for your family; you have to take care of them. You're already involved —there's no going back. Otherwise, your family will be shamed, your little sister will be endangered, you'll be guilty and you'll be killed.” I was fourteen years old and trapped. My uncle had disappeared; later, he was found dead. That's how I slipped into it, without wanting to. It was like my body and soul were dead.”

“How many people did you inform on?”

“Shafeek, Mohammad, Zaher, and later also Abdulrahman, Thair, Nidal, Abu Mohammad—and Mirjam, too.”

“What happened to these people?”

“Shafeek, Zaher and Mohammad were shot dead by the Israeli intelligence service here in the village. Two of them were my relatives; they were hiding in my aunt's house. I was often at

their place: they trusted me. Captain Fu called and said, "Observe them well, and when they go to sleep, call me. I want to get them when they're asleep. Nothing's going to happen to them—we just want to prevent them from running away. At worst, they'll be shot. But they're just supposed to be arrested." I said, "Is that a promise?" "Of course. We just want to save their lives." That evening I sat under the olive tree in the field next to my aunt's house. Around 8 p.m. they went into the house. After a while I saw a light, then the windows went dark. I called Captain Fu, told him that they were sleeping and went home."

"Didn't your family want to know why you were out so late?"

"Yes. My mother kept asking me. I said I'd been at my aunt's."

"How old were you then?"

"Fifteen."

"Then what happened?"

"Around two in the morning I woke up at the sound of military jeeps. Knowing that the three would be arrested, I went back to sleep. The next day I woke to the sound of Koran singing from the minaret. Then I knew that someone had died. I ran to my aunt's house. All three had been shot as they were sleeping. I cried and screamed and went wild. I called Captain Fu and asked why he'd shot them dead—he'd only wanted to capture them! He said it was none of my business."

"How much money did you get for this order? For acting as an accessory to murder?"

"Seventy shekels. But I never collected them. I sat in the house of mourning, hoping that would be the end of it. But soon Captain Fu called again and said, "Here are the next names. You have no choice. You'll either be shot by your compatriots or by us."

"And then?"

"I carried out the next order to observe three people, and then another two."

"Where are these people now?"

"Three had left the village because they sensed they were being informed on. But within a few weeks, one after the other was shot dead by the Israeli intelligence service. Ha and Ma were killed in the village."

"Are you responsible for the deaths of these people?"

"Yes, I am."

"How many people have died?"

"Eight."

"Did you kill them?"

"Yes, I killed them because I enabled their killing by the intelligence service."

"What punishment do you deserve?"

"I deserve death."

"Did anyone pressure you to make this confession?"

"No, I'm doing it of my own free will, I can't bear it any longer."

"Which death do you deserve?"

“I deserve to be killed the cruelest way. I should be dragged like a dog through the street.”

“What's the last thing you want to say to your family and the people in your village?”

“I'd like to say that I'm very sorry. I've betrayed you. I apologize. To all those working for the intelligence service, I say they should stop immediately. They should go as quickly as possible to honest political activists, confess and ask to be forgiven. They should seek counseling and not allow themselves to be lured step by step into the deadly trap. I ask for forgiveness —not because I want to live, but so that I can die.”

“What do you want to say to your mother?”

“To my mother? Forgive me. I've disappointed you. I've killed people who were fighting for our land, our life and our future. I'm not worthy of living.”

His voice gave out, his head fell forward and his frame seemed to shrink. He began to cry and sob with his whole body. Softly he added, “*Jamma*, forgive me. Tell everyone, forgive me. I can't go on.”

Seventeen-year-old Ra, the child with four years' experience as a collaborator, was shot dead. His shame weighed on his mother and siblings. They were shut out of the community, shunned. They have no future. If they don't receive welfare, their vulnerability and abandonment threaten to push them, in turn, into becoming collaborators. They are victims and will be made into criminals.

It's very dangerous to raise a taboo subject like this. The Israeli intelligence service wants to maintain the collaborator system to perpetuate the occupation and their domination. The Palestinian Authority requests that collaborators give themselves up; legal proceedings and amnesty and rehabilitation are possible, within limits. Palestinian resistance fighters assume the right to prosecute, interrogate and kill collaborators. Absent the rule of law and given the police's inability to act, many innocents are made victims. Collaborators are always at risk. If they want to stop, or once they've been recognized, they're killed by their accomplices who are also working for the Israeli intelligence service. The occupation is violence, and only with the violence of collaborators can the occupation continue. Within the field of collaboration, children are mostly informants, while adults are violent criminals, often charged with very dangerous orders like killing.

Most collaborators are between twelve and seventeen years old. They are recruited in prison where they are subjected to extreme physical and psychological pressure through beatings, sexual abuse, and threats of longer prison sentences, shameful rumors and endangerment of family members, or they are tempted with money, sex and the promise of work or more freedom of movement. Their weakness, fear, naivety, and vulnerability are exploited.

For almost forty years, from ten to twelve thousand Palestinians have been imprisoned at any given moment. Ten percent of them are children under eighteen years of age.

Confessions by children who have been tortured result in forty percent of them becoming collaborators. They are stigmatized and excluded; they kill and are killed.

Many adolescents can't and don't want to remain in the country. They try every means possible to go abroad. Some young people state on their visa application that they are collaborators—despite being politically clean and correct—in order to be granted asylum on the grounds of their presumed persecution. Being a collaborator is treason, life-threatening and the greatest shame possible in our society. Yet some young people claim that they are collaborators just to be able to get away. They get visas for countries that sympathize with collaborators and leave, believing that abroad they'll find a new life with many opportunities. Some do manage that, while others become victims of the intelligence services there who make them into real collaborators—their only means of surviving in a foreign country....

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22 February 2007

Today was a special day. For the first time I met my Israeli friend, Hanna, whom I've known for five years—but only over the phone and via the internet. She had originally called and introduced herself, saying that a “woman of peace” had given her my name. Hanna's family had donated a rose garden to the Jerusalem Park and she was trying to find an Arab botanist to supply the Arabic names for the various roses and other plants in the garden. She sent me what she had and with pleasure, I passed along my modest knowledge of plant identification. It was striking for me to talk with an Israeli woman about roses instead of politics. Ever since then, Hanna has continued to call and ask about the family. If I'm not at home, she talks with my husband or my children. Her thoughts and sensitive concern for our family have made her our friend. But we had never been able to meet because the Wall separates us and Israelis are no longer allowed to visit. In the past, Israeli women would take us to Jerusalem in their cars and we were able to do a lot together. Today that's no longer possible.

To prepare my course, I needed books from the university in Jerusalem.

I wanted to get an overview of what new botany books had been published in Israel in the meantime. I asked Hanna for help. She immediately agreed to get me some books. We decided to finally meet in person. But how and where could we do that? Coincidence came to the rescue. One day Israelis and Palestinians met to discuss inter-religious subjects at the Talitha Kumi School—right next to my seminar room. Astonished, I looked into how they'd gotten there and learned that the east gate to the school is classified as Zone A, that is, “Palestinian”, and the west gate of the school as Zone C, or “Israeli”. The Palestinians entered through the east gate and the Israelis through the west gate. That gave me to think that I could meet Hanna the same way. She was enthusiastic about my idea and said her friend Dalia would drive her there right away. Dalia inquired about the route Israelis were allowed to take and set off. They arrived before me in Beit Jala and inspected the school, which greatly pleased them. It was the first Palestinian school

they'd ever visited. I was excited and anxious about what Hanna would look like and how our meeting would go.

As I entered the seminar room, two women flung themselves at me. We hugged each other with shrieks of joy. They introduced themselves. Then it became very quiet as we surveyed each other from head to toe and smiled. On the phone Hanna had said that she was 73 years old, yet I found her to be young and vivacious, full of energy and very charismatic. I was happy to finally meet my friend in person, and to gain another friend, as well—Dalia, the botanist. I'd brought with me seventeen sandwiches for my students and we ate some of them and drank tea. We had almost two hours before my seminar started. Hanna spread before me lots of books on botany and handed me a bar of chocolate. I was moved. There were also brochures about birds and animals in Palestine. What a wonderful gift! Dalia also took part in the conversation. As fellow botanists we understood and admired each other. But our meeting was interrupted: a pupil entered the room and requested to speak with me privately, before the lesson. Hanna and Dalia were very understanding, and I disappeared with the boy into an adjacent room. While they were waiting for me, other schoolgirls and boys came in and began to talk with them. Our time was over quickly and much had not been said. We could have talked for hours. We definitely wanted to meet again. There was just enough time left to take photos. Then we said goodbye.

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