

Visiting Nablus

Michael Berry, Physics Department, University of Bristol

(Departmental occasional newsletter, June 1993)

Some of my Israeli colleagues urged me not to visit occupied Palestine, or, if I insisted on going, to take a gun. They cited examples of well-meaning visitors who had been attacked or even killed. I took comfort from the fact that these were always the same few examples, and decided to go anyway (unarmed), trusting the hospitality of my hosts to protect me from possible assailants. However, prudence did suggest that driving through Palestine in an Israeli rental car might be risky, so my wife dropped me by the checkpoint at Tulkaram. My host was waiting in a Palestinian-registered car on the other side, to drive me to Nablus, a few miles away in the West Bank. It was unnerving to stop in a back street just moments later and be told "Now we have to change to another car", but this turned out to be connected more with the mysteries of insurance than the beginning of an abduction.

"Here, everything is dominated by politics", my host declared as we drove past bleak-looking fields whose farmers had been forced to change their pattern of cultivation because they were denied water for irrigation. Just outside Tulkaram was a camp inhabited by refugees from the founding of Israel in 1948. I was told that the high wire fences were not to keep people in but to stop them stoning passing Israeli vehicles. When I was driven through another such camp later in the day, I was surprised to find not the ragged tents I had expected but permanent houses and shops, looking rather like villages I have seen in India and Africa (and not the poorest). Apparently the UN, recognising that there is no realistic hope of the occupants ever returning to their original homes in Israel, is trying to drop the designation 'refugee' in the hope that gradually the villages will become integrated into the surrounding community.

The Al-Najah National University houses 4000 students crowded onto a small campus (they have more land but for the moment cannot develop it because it adjoins an Israeli jail). About half the students were women, a few partially veiled but most in rather glamorous Western clothes. I was pleased to see some accompanied by their small children (as I was in Bristol for several years). Pictures of Yasser Arafat were everywhere, and student politics was being conducted vociferously at full volume through loud-hailers (on that day, the shouters were calling

for a committee to be set up to investigate the mysterious appearance and disappearance of unauthorised tents on the campus).

I had been invited by somebody whose research was related to mine, but we decided that a general talk about physics would be more appropriate than a research seminar. Fortunately the electricity failure occurred just after I had shown the critical slide. After initial shyness, there were a number of questions from students, and I was amused that most were completely unrelated to the subject of my talk ("How do you explain the twin paradox in relativity?; What is quantum tunnelling?"). During the day there was almost no scientific discussion with members of the physics department. All had obtained doctorates in the USA or Canada, but were too occupied with heavy teaching loads, and too hampered by poor library and almost nonexistent laboratory facilities, to conduct research in Nablus.

After lunch, we went for a tour of the area. The stony slopes peppered with olive trees, and round-topped Ottoman lookout stations on the hilltops, form a distinctive and strangely beautiful landscape. We drove past many old Arab villages and new Jewish settlements, and I heard about life's daily irritations and humiliations under the occupation, and more serious oppressions, all delivered in a quiet monotone. "Soon after the start of the intifada, a local commander decided this village needed to be taught a lesson. He ordered all that all the men between twelve and fifty be taken away and their hands and legs broken, except for one boy whose legs were spared so that he could walk home and report what had happened. There was no publicity about this event until an army officer, sickened by what he saw, spoke out; as a result, the military governor of Nablus was replaced." I have no reason to doubt the good faith of my informants, but of course cannot know whether these stories are accurate reports, or exaggerations, or inventions.

At this point I perceived that although my hosts knew that my wife is Israeli and therefore almost certainly Jewish, they did not realise that I am Jewish too. This became apparent to me when they asked whether I had suffered by what they imagined would be the Israeli government's disapproval of mixed marriages. Probably they were misled by my name and my (to them) unfamiliar non-American English accent. More from mischief than prudence, I decided not to enlighten them immediately. It pleased me that although I heard many criticisms of the policies of Israel, not a single anti-Semitic remark was uttered or implied. And when I finally 'came out', they did not turn a hair.

The high point of the tour, literally as well as metaphorically, was a visit to the family village of a university official. We had tea in the hilltop mansion of one of his relatives who although only in his thirties,

was apparently a millionaire (from processing turkey meat for the Israeli market), with (at the latest count) seventeen children.

We returned to Nablus through a checkpoint which was "one of the worst" - although apparently the soldiers now have instructions to be polite in their questioning. My driver was taken to the back of the vehicle and asked about me. Although English and Arabic are official languages in Israel, the questioning was in Hebrew for a long time, until the soldier came to realise he was not being understood. And although the soldier (who looked like a raw recruit) had seen my British passport, he repeatedly asked when I would be returning to America. Perhaps he was simply stupid.

I stayed the night in Nablus, and was slightly embarrassed to be accommodated in a university flat which was the home of a British woman teacher of English, who in spite of my hosts' protestations had not been informed of my arrival. She told me that since the closure of the border (to Palestinians) several months ago, support for the intifada was petering out. Several organisations, vying for support in the population, frequently call strikes on different days, causing confusion among shopkeepers who have to telephone each other each morning and ask: "Should we be on strike today?". Shops near military centres tended to remain open, because those who would intimidate the owners were themselves intimidated from taking reprisals by the proximity of Israeli soldiers. (So far, nothing seems to intimidate the intimidators' intimidators.)

The next morning, before returning me to Tulkaram, my host took me to buy a characteristic and delicious Nablus confection - syrupy cereal threads over a base of cheese - "as a present for your wife". At the border, I was the only person crossing on foot. The guard inspecting the documents of the drivers ignored me as I walked into Israel, en route back to the tranquil and companionable security and intellectual intensity of the Weizmann Institute, where I was enjoying my annual visit.