

Journal From Palestine - Jean McLaren

This is my first real letter from Palestine. It is a week since I left Canada and much has happened. I am in a small Palestinian village called Haris, which is located about the centre of the Occupied Territories. It is the home of the International Womens Peace Service, the group I am working with for the next month. Our village is surrounded by Israeli settlements even though it is far inside Palestine. One of the largest settlements is across the highway from us and called Areil. There are several large industrial compounds in the Areil district, separate from their settlement.

Our work mainly is observing human rights abuses, working with Palestinian women, and we will be working on the olive harvest. But right now one of our biggest projects is opposition to the Wall.

The Wall or 'Aparthied Wall' is in some places a real wall (I haven't seen that one yet) but mostly a wide road cut through the land not worrying whether it separates villages from their olive trees or people from their families. On each side of the road, which is only for the military, there is heavy, rolled, razor wire and a fence with wire on top. Impossible to pass through. In some place there is a huge yellow gate which is supposedly opened at the military whim if someone wished to pass through. This does not happen often for Palestinians.

The first couple of days after my arrival in the country were spent sleeping off jet lag. Then traveling here, first from Tel Aviv and then Jerusalem. I picked up a cell phone in Jerusalem and still have problems using it.

My first day of action was Wednesday when three of us went to a Checkpoint at the edge of the border between Israel and the Occupied Territory. We had heard there were several men who were being detained there because they were going to work at jobs in Israel. One of them had a van and also there were two horses. They were impounded in the field across the road and the men were on the other side of the road under some olive trees.

We were appalled to see the state of the space where they were situated as it was covered, and I mean covered, in plastic bags, empty pop bottles, cigarette packs etc. It was obvious that a lot of people have been detained in that spot over time.

We have a plan to do a garbage detail demo soon but you will have to wait for that story.

The day was very hot and I had not realized where we were going or I would have brought my umbrella for shade and some food. We had left home at 8am, traveled in two taxis and a hitch with a Jewish settler, who took us the wrong way, and a lot of walking. It took almost two hours to travel only a few miles, because of roadblocks (piles of rocks and dirt which cannot be passed by a vehicle, so you have to take a taxi, walk over the roadblock and get another taxi. This was difficult for us, but it happens every single day for the Palestinians who must go to work in places other than their home village. And if they don't have the taxi fare they walk.

The men that we went to help at the Checkpoint had been there for many hours, some of them since midnight. Sometimes

they try to get through 'illegally' as apparently it is illegal for an Israeli to hire a Palestinian, in threat of jail, so the soldiers told us. They all do though, as they can pay them lower wages.

We sat there, both with the men, trying at frequent intervals to negotiate with the soldiers to let them leave. They could not leave without their identity cards and so they just sat there.

By noon I was getting a little sun struck, we had a little water but no food. The men did get permission to go back to the next town (without their ID) to get food for themselves but we didn't want to leave. It was interesting that the soldiers went and got some food for the horses but not for the men. They gave us some pink tinted water that made me feel sick. By that time it was close to 2pm. I was ready to faint with heat and hunger and along came an Israeli woman named Dorothy who was sympathetic with the men. She had along a Norwegian film crew. They interviewed us, gave us some food, interviewed the men and also the soldiers and then took us back to the first roadblock where The Wall will enclose a Palestinian home away from their village and right next to the fence of a settlement. They refuse to relocate or sell their land to the Israelis so they are stuck there. The Israelis may just confiscate and destroy it. There has been a Peace Camp there in the past and some of the sleeping bags were still in a tree next to the house. The place is called Mas'ha. We visited the family and they gave us water and some wonderful lemonade and we finally got home around 4pm. It was a very heavy day for me, but after a short nap I revived, to have dinner which included 5 visitors (making us 11) and an evening of talk until midnight. How was that for a day.

The next day was also eventful—will it be like this everyday? We traveled north to a town called Jabalah, where the Wall again is being built, to visit a family whose home is being confiscated. They have been given notice of 3 days. It was such a beautiful place and the man had cleared the land of rocks and planted so many trees—fruit and olives—and gardens and we saw the razor wire wall right up next to the wall of their home not yet connected. This will isolate him next to a settlement. It is all so frustrating and sad. Families disrupted and isolated.

I must sign off now, you have enough to think about. On November 9 there will be an International Day of Protest against the Wall. Perhaps you all could think of what you will do in your community after reading what I am writing.

For more information on our group visit our website www.womenspacepalestine.org.

October 1, 2003

Have you heard about The Wall? It is mostly a fence, which I wrote about last time. But not the kind of fence you would have between you and your neighbour to keep the dogs out or in whichever the case may be. It is actually two fences, one high with barbed wire on the top, then a road (for the army patrol) and then another huge roll of razor wire.

But the terrible part is that it is cutting into and around towns and villages in the West Bank, very often cutting off that town

from everyone else. Sometimes it has cut off single families as I mentioned in the last letter.

Yesterday we went to Tel Aviv to do a demonstration in front of the American Embassy about the Wall. On the way to the road to get the taxi I had to walk through a pile of garbage to get down and I stepped on a small shard of glass that went through the thick heel of my sandals and into my heel. I said a small ouch and went on realizing that my foot felt squish. Blood! So we had to perform First Aid on the side of the road. But all is well and I went on.

On arrival at the Embassy we found an armed fortress: a large blank wall on the first floor, small windows, and dozens of guards. They have big iron posts right out to the edge of the sidewalk which the soldiers said was US private property and no one was allowed except a favoured few to walk upon it.

We were prepared with a large piece of garden trellis, 'the Wall', to which we tied a huge cheque saying that the wall cost \$2 million per kilometer. The dollar signs were in red white and blue, as much of this is being paid for by the US government. No, not the government, the US taxpayers. Many of our team are Americans, several of them are Jewish. So that is why we were there. They tried to go in and the police said it was closed (like the Wall?) and only open for an hour from 11 to 12 am.

We had made many signs, one said STOP THE WALL, which I carried. I was dressed as an olive tree, with cloth leaves I had painted green and cut out and pinned to my shirt and hat. We did street theatre across the street when the police moved us there. People trying to get past to their olive groves (me) and guards telling them to go back. One woman lay down on the sidewalk pretending to have a baby, others said they needed to go to work.

There was not a lot of walking traffic but we handed out leaflets to those who would take them. Many turned the other way. But there were a lot of cars going by and we would slowly cross the road a few times so to stop traffic. That is a Raging Granny tactic I told them about. We do that in Victoria in front of the Empress in order to show our signs about nuclear ships.

We moved to few other locations, police following but had no arrests. Guess we made their day interesting.

Getting home was another thing. We had taken a taxi all the way there with a Palestinian man who had the right coloured license plate (yellow) but on the return we had to take a settlers bus, they let us off several miles down the road and by this time it was about 6:30pm and already getting dark. So the four of us hitched. After a while a man in a SUV stopped and gave us a lift. He spoke only Hebrew (we later found out he was a Russian Israeli) and he took us into the Israeli Barqan Industrial Site which is across the road and visible from our house in Hares (Palestinian village)—quite deep inside the West Bank. He went way down into a gravel pit and we had a few feelings of apprehension ñ was he going to abandon us there? But he was filling up his gas tank. And he then delivered us right to the road block at the entrance to our village. Safe home, tired and hungry and off to bed. Love to all, Jean

October 3, 2003

This morning I was up early as usual, but also I was actually dressed when our landlord knocked on our door and said the soldiers were on the road. I went up to the roof and could see the

army jeep on the highway adjacent to our house, not the usual place at the roadblock up the hill. Kate and I quickly went over to see what was happening.

We found a large truck with a crane demolishing the roadside greenhouse of some people from our village of Haris. There were four men doing the demolition, and four soldiers guarding them from the family who owned the greenhouse, and from us I guess.

The family consisted, as far as we could tell, of the son, who was probably in his fifties, his wife, a very friendly woman, possibly her sister-in-law who was holding a very small baby, and the grandmother, who we learned was 81.

The women greeted Kate and myself with enthusiasm, and we proceeded to photograph the scene, then to ask the soldiers why this was taking place. They were obviously giving us smart-ass answers like: 'We had to demolish it because they didn't have a permit to be there'—even though we could tell by the materials it had been there for years. One soldier said 'Because it is ugly.' Another said, 'Oh I just woke up this morning and decided to do a demolition.'

However, the grandmother, a true Raging Granny, frail though she was, did not take it lying down. She shouted the whole time at the demolition crew and the soldiers, Her son tried to pull her back, once quite harshly, as he was probably worried about her safety but she was having none of it, and held on fiercely to the barbed wire fence. We were worried she would cut her hand. I asked a soldier if he had a grandmother and how he would feel if she was in this situation. He turned his back on me. Kate asked another soldier, 'Don't you recognize these people as human beings?' To which he replied, 'No, they are just a pile of shit.'

We stayed until the demo truck pulled away, the soldiers left, most of the family and the other onlookers who had gathered, and only Kate and I and the two younger women and the grandmother were left. As the old woman sat desolate on the ground, I did some Reiki on her and she calmed down and went over to sit under a tree to pray. While she prayed she picked up seed pods from the ground and put them into little piles. Symbolically, I thought, reseeding the land and rebuilding in her mind.

So this is one of the everyday things that the Palestinian people have to deal with and what we are monitoring and telling you about. I was very disturbed for the rest of the day as the image of the grandmother kept coming back to haunt me. Another morning in Palestine, Jean

October 9, 2003

Just arrived home after a two day jaunt to Jayous, a town affected by the Wall. We were joining with ISM people to protest the locking of the gate in the Wall stopping the farmers from getting to their fields. It was all planned as a very peaceful protest with the elderly farmers going first, then the women and kids and followed by the others. We would be shields on either side. We were hoping for about 200 farming families and there were about 40 of us from many different countries.

Before we left I had an upset stomach with cramps but figured I would be ok. Halfway there as we changed taxis at Funduq, I realized I would need to find a washroom quick! That took some negotiation and the young man from the store

took us to his family house. There was no time for greetings or formalities. I had to get in there. The toilet was a hole in the floor. Aim is difficult. No more to say.

We went on to Jayous and arrived there about 6pm. There was to be a meeting but because of my tummy upset I was afraid to go anywhere and did not wish to eat anything. The house where we were to stay had lots of room but no running water in the bathroom. It was a new house not quite finished. There was wire supplied from across the street for lights. There was no way I could stay there so they sent me over across the road to a family. I had to sit out in their courtyard while the whole family came to look at me and try to speak some English. The mother had a one-month-old baby, plus several other children right up to 18 years old. Her husband had been just given a 20-year jail sentence for killing a man who was collaborating with the Israelis to grab land in their town. So he would not see his family for 20 years as the prison is in Israel and the family is are not allowed to go there.

I spent the evening playing with the kids and finally making up a song that would sing everyone's name in one song after another. We all sang to everyone including me.

The next morning I rose before light and joined with our group to walk to the gate. We were disappointed that not as many farmers arrived but altogether we were about 120. We found the gate locked and no soldiers there so we waited. Finally a soldier in a jeep arrived, saw us all as we sat on the ground outside the gate, and he then left.

A farmer who had stayed in the field all night accepted a bag of food and water from a woman and ran away back into the trees. The woman cried as he left.

Suddenly a group of young Palestinian men armed with a crowbar and the strength of their arms pried open the gate. Although it was not part of 'the plan' we all cheered and went through. So much for security. The soldiers did not come back for nearly an hour but by that time we were walking to the groves.

It was very hot and our group had walked over 2km and had not found a farmer to work with. Even the good old cell phones failed to find them, and we sat trying to find shade. By that time I was feeling pretty sick and getting so hot that I said I would go back to the gate. Uphill all the way. I am getting pretty good at walking but that was all I could take. No good as a passed-out activist. I got back to the gate and a taxi came along and picked up several of us. I was not the only one to give in to the heat.

We rested at the ISM house and in the middle of the afternoon we heard that three Internationals had been arrested and taken away. One of them was a young man named Chris who I had helped train in non-violence the week before. I was worried about him. Then we heard another bulletin that the gate was locked, many soldiers had arrived and people were not being allowed back out.

Some of us went down again with water and food and just as we were descending the very steep hill the soldiers threw a tear gas bomb at us. It missed most of the crowd but floated up to us and we got a huge waft in our eyes. We were carrying onions which we split open on the roads and rubbed them around the eyes of those affected. One young boy, I am sure thought he was going blind. He screamed and there was nothing I could do to get him to calm down. His mother was crying and I tried to tell her he would be okay in a few minutes. Finally someone came

and carried him further away.

I walked down the road to see if I could help others, the gas didn't affected me too much as I tried to keep grounded and calm—good old magic worked!

Just as I got to the bottom near the gate they threw another tear gas right into the crowd but luckily the wind was blowing to the left so we ran to the right into the olive trees.

Two more of the Internationals were picked off and arrested and two Palestinians. They kept them blindfolded in the jeeps for over an hour. And then strangely enough, some of the farmers and activist helpers started to arrive and slowly walked toward the gates and were let through one by one. It seems that the soldiers change their minds, minute to minute.

However, the soldiers got aggressive when we would not go away from the gate. I and three other women stayed close negotiating with them and then suddenly they drove a jeep out the gate and right toward us. One of the women said join hands and stop them but I could see they would have just hit us at the speed they were going and I was not ready to die so I moved aside and so did they.

By this time it was getting dark and looking behind I could see the moon rising and ahead the sun setting and the last group could be seen coming over the hill. It included my two teammates from IWPS, Nijmie and Hannah. I was so glad to see them.

We found later in the evening that all people who had been arrested were released. So you never know what the day will bring—from 'back-door trots' as my old Aunt used to say, to tear gas and onions.

October 13, 2003: Thanksgiving, Olives and Brutal Palestinian Hospitality

It is hard to believe that today is Thanksgiving. I am so far from home and things are unfamiliar and yet becoming familiar.

The look of the horizon of hills around me as I hang the wash on the lines up on the roof of our home.

There are no large trees, but many olive trees in every direction. To the south east on the top of the hills I can see the edge of the huge Israeli settlement of Ariel. If you look out at night, there are huge orange streetlights running in straight rows.

If I look to the North above our house I see the homes of the people in our village. So different are they from the perfectly straight rows of settlers houses. The Palestinian houses are built to the contours of the land. Each one is different, built from concrete or stone or both. There is usually some kind of garden in the front or the back, and always a place to congregate and have tea or coffee, which is profusely offered.

Yesterday I went to buy groceries and while I was waiting for someone to go to another place for olive oil, the proprietor offered me coffee, in a tiny cup and *very* strong, with lots of sugar. It can give a shot right up to the sky!

For the past few days we have been picking olives at a village about 5km down the highway. It is just below Ariel and often the settlers or the soldiers come to harass the farmers from picking their olives and making them leave as I told you last week. But the last few days for me went smoothly. The first day I

picked this week was with members of a large family. There are eight sons in this family and four of them live in houses close to each other.

I really enjoyed picking with them and we did lots of laughing although I do not speak any Arabic. They spoke little English, only a few words except one son who is a local policeman. He was also going to university and learning computer programming. He asked me many questions but didn't ask me to marry him like some of them do in fun. I am a real oddity and when I tell them my age in hand signals of tens and then the last '6' the eyes get bigger and bigger, and we all laugh. Most of our IWPS women are in their '20s with a few in their '40s.

After we had picked all the trees that they wished to do that day— at about noon—we walked up the hill to their home. I was pretty tired and it was hot going up the hill, but we arrived and I realized I had been there before, the day we came to the womens' meeting about the Wall.

First we had tea then a huge meal was put before us. Wonderful soup with tomatoes, potatoes and meat, plus there were olives, pickles, humous, cucumbers and tomatoes, and huge soft homemade flat bread to scoop up the food. We were offered a drink like Coca Cola (bottled in Ramallah with the name RC).

By this time we were totally stuffed. I could not eat another bite and this is when what we call 'Brutal Palestinian Hospitality' came in. One of the brothers wives next door arrived with two huge plates of chicken and rice with nuts on top. I could not eat anything at all even though she urged me to take just one bite. Even that was almost impossible. My team mate Nijmie, from Philadelphia, who usually can eat circles around all of us, tried to eat some and couldn't. But people are insulted if you don't so she tried. I knew I would be ill if I did. In fact I have had a few days here when I ate nothing but water and found it quite bearable. You may be surprised to see me many pounds lighter on my return unless I gain it back in Australia.

So this brings me to the end of this little story, thinking of what I am thankful for. My life, my family and friends, and my freedom to move my arms and legs and speak my mind. I am thankful for the earth and sky and the sun rising in the morning and the moon and stars at night. I am thankful for the beautiful place where I live on Gabriola and I hope that I can do a little bit towards helping get out the word of the plight of these wonderful people who somehow keep going in the face of humiliation, death, degradation and unemployment. They are truly amazing and I am learning so much from them. Love to all, Jean.

October 17, 2003: Cultural Differences and Furtive Singing

Anyone who knows me well, is aware how much I love to sing. Singing with the Raging Grannies, singing with HeartSong Womens Choir on Gabriola, singing chants in ritual, and just singing.

So it is with sorrow when I find that in Palestine it is not culturally correct for women to sing in the presence of men. In

fact one night some of us were singing in our house just playing around and singing political songs. And our 'cultural director' Nijmie walked over and closed the window so that if anyone was walking by the house they would not hear us.

There are many things we watch. Making sure our clothes are not too tight, our upper arms covered and of course our legs, and making sure our necklines are not plunging. When I was in Jerusalem I bought a beautiful red skirt that came to my ankles and will roll up in a ball in the corner of my luggage and come out without a crease. But someone said if you wear that skirt out in the street they will think you look like a settler. Sigh...

Yesterday Joyce and I were picking olives with a nice family who were helping their neighbour, a widow, harvest her sparse trees right along the highway. There were not many olives on most of the trees. I imagine the fumes from the trucks going by would not help their growth. Picking for the Palestinians near the road is hazardous and often the soldiers come by and say they must leave and then all olives must be left behind and sometimes even their donkeys who carry the olives in their big sacks home.

After a time the family brought out food for us to eat. I was pretty hungry by then as it was around 10am and I'd had my breakfast at 5am, not much—a piece of bread and an orange and coffee.

They had containers with olives, pickles, a chopped up avocado and my favourite, tomatoes cooked with garlic in olive oil. Instead of the usual pita bread they had homemade flat bread which is softer and comes in huge circles and can be torn off. I was passed my bread and as the tomato mixture was on my far left, I reached over with my left hand, to dip my bread in the mixture. Immediately the father of the family said in English, 'no, no, do not use that hand.' Chastised, I reverted.

The day before I picked olives on a very steep hill. My graduated lens on my glasses were not beneficial in this terrain and I felt like I would slip and slide at any time. I felt a bit dizzy.

There were quite a few of us picking in this area as the people had been denied access in the morning until we arrived along with a bus full of Israelis from 'Rabbis for Peace' headed by Arik Akerman who some of you may have heard of. He is an American now living in Israel. There were plenty of us and so I had a chance to rest from time to time. One of the women had a small baby who had an eye infection and he had a little hammock made from a blanket slung up in a tree. I was trying to find some shade and that tree looked inviting so I sat down and soon the baby started to fuss. So I decided that everyone was far enough away that if I sang softly, the others would not hear me and started to rock the hammock and sing to the baby. As I sang, he put his finger in his mouth and off he went to sleep. If I stopped he would open his big brown eyes and gaze at me as if to say 'Don't stop.' After a while he was snoozing deeply and I realized that I felt much better. I am sure it was the singing. So we always find ways to resist even furtively. And, for sure, I will wear my red skirt in Australia.

October 19, 2003: Demo at Ariel and Herding Cats

On Friday we joined with a Group of Israeli Gays and Lesbians called 'Black Laundry' to stage a demonstration against the Wall at the gate of the Ariel settlement. This is the largest settlement in

the Occupied Territories and contains around 40,000 people including a large college. It is in sight of our house in the village of Hares.

We planned to meet near the gate. The Black Laundry group traveled from Jerusalem by Settler Bus and when they arrived the bus let them off inside the settlement, we went by taxi and stopped outside the gate. The other group had signs that were not quite ready and so there was a bit of confusion. We had our signs ready including some poles that the other group needed for their signs. However, they were immediately surrounded by police and as they were not organized well, the police closed in. We decided that we had better go in and join them as they did not seem very experienced in dealing with army and police. We deal with them daily.

The police said the signs could not be held up, but I picked up one that said 'STOP THE WALL'—just those simple words—that I carried in our demo in Tel Aviv a few weeks ago. I just stood to the side so that those people driving into the settlement could see it and the police didn't notice me for awhile.

Just then a couple of jeeps full of soldiers arrived and said 'This is a closed military area. You will have to leave.' I have heard those words many times in this country, especially in my trips here in 1991 and 1992 when I was on Peace Walks with other Internationals. Usually this is spontaneous from the army—just a catch phrase to get us to leave. We continued the dialogue until they said we must go 200 metres away from the gate.

I wondered what the magic words were about 200 metres. When I was arrested and convicted of defying a court order at Clayoquot Sound I was told that I could not be closer than 200 metres to any logging road in British Columbia for two years. That is not an easy job if you live on Gabriola which has quite a few logging roads.

Anyway to continue, we walked out the gate carrying signs and up the road not quite 200 metres but close. Again the police and army said we must leave. They kept changing their own rules. Then they said you must get into the police cars and go with them to the Green Line which is supposed to be the border between Palestine and Israel. The Israelis quickly jumped into the police cars but our group of seven women did not. We either pretended we did not understand or just stood with blank faces. It was marvelous. The captain kept yelling at us. Finally three of us were left and he yelled again and again 'Get in the jeep now!' We kept looking at him blankly. Finally he said 'Get in the jeep or I will arrest you.' Slowly we climbed in. I had a fit of internal giggles as I thought of someone trying to herd cats—not an easy thing to do.

After they left us miles up the road, and now in Israel, we joined with all the others and held up our signs for more than one hour. It was hot on the pavement but quite fun. One sign said 'SLOW DOWN FOR PASSPORT CONTROL,' and some of the cars actually slowed down. Some honked beep, beep to say they supported us, others honked—beeeeeep—to say they didn't.

Finally because it was Friday and the Jewish Sabbath, the Israelis went over to the bus stop to catch the last bus to Tel Aviv, and we got a taxi and went to eat. We came home pretty tired but had no dishes to wash and some leftover food for the next day.

October 20, 2003 : Singing with the Women

I had the most most fun day I have ever had in Palestine today. Four of us, Kate, Hannah, Lynn and I went to Tulkarem to join with some women from PARC which is the Palestine Agricultural Relief Committee. It took us quite awhile to get there going the long way around and walking about two miles to the second road block from our village as we could not get a taxi or hitch a lift. These days there are not many taxis on the road as they are getting their permits lifted time after time. One week, two weeks, whatever the whim of the army. When we ask why they just say 'we are punishing them for being on the road where they are not supposed to be' who knows which road and when. We are afraid sometimes that they will get into trouble for transporting us.

We finally made it to Tulkarem, and found the office which was filled with about a dozen women, some of them dressed up in nice clothes and a couple even had on high heels and we were supposed to be helping pick olives.

After a time we got onto a bus and traveled to the spot to pick the olives only to find a road block, which could have been traversed by a car but not the bus so we all got out and walked. Soon the personalities of the women started to come out when we were away from the male driver. They laughed and chatted and we walked down a long hill and sat under a tree to have some wonderful soft flat bread that I would love to make but you need a special oven. Some had cheese cooked in, others had herbs and another had something called zatar. The warm bread was so delicious. Those toppings might work on a focaccia bread recipe.

We then looked ahead and found that the trees we needed to pick were on the opposite side of the hill—way up nearer to the settlement. Two of the women had crutches so, of course, I could not be a wimp and say I couldn't make it. I literally went on all fours. Hands and feet up the cliff, not a pretty sight but I made it and the group cheered when I got to the top and so did I.

We had such a fun day and the women sang and as the day ended I taught them a song our Womens Choir sings: 'Nisa nisa nisa, Nisa nisa nisa, Nisa nisa nisa, Gi wa ho, gi wa ho.' Which mean loosely 'We have been working on the land and now we are going home.'

We came home feeling this was the happiest day we'd had since we came here. I can't help thinking how much singing cheers me.

Several hours later we found out that Tulkarem had a closure and a young man had been shot in the city only about an hour after we left. I can't believe how it seems I am in the right place at the right time everywhere I go. Yes I can, my good luck comes from the love and the magic around me from my friends. Thanks to you all, love from Jean.

October 22, 2003

I have been getting quite a few letters from people who are very worried about me. Please know that I am not going to jump into any place that I will risk danger. I know that the whole country is pretty dangerous, but no more so that it was when I was here in March and the war with Iraq was on. Our village is

in the centre of the Occupied Territories, but it is relatively peaceful. People go about their daily lives doing what they need to do. They get up go to work if they have a job, the kids go to school, the stores usually open as we have not had a curfew. There is a closure which is somewhat different from the curfew when everything is shut down and people must stay inside their homes. The closure means mostly that there are soldiers stationed at the entrance to the village which is blocked by a pile of rocks and dirt and no cars can get in or out which is constant, even if one has a car you can't use it to go anywhere far. So many taxi drivers have lost their permits to be on certain roads that some days we have to wait an hour or more for one, and we are lucky as we know some drivers that we can call.

Yesterday we worked with two women from this village who have olive trees right below a settlement very close to us. We could walk there. Luckily none of the settlers bothered us at all. It was very hot yesterday and I got a little too much sun so I am staying home today and doing a few jobs that need to be done such as getting the place tidy and buying some food. There are 8 of us here now and we eat lots. I am fantasizing about what I will eat when I leave. I long for some nice fish from our Gabriola Fish Store and seeing Sylvia's smiling face. And ice cream too. A lot of planes have been going overhead since yesterday. Ramallah is quite a few miles away and Gaza is a long way. Not by US or Canadian standards but here, yes.

So I am fine and don't worry. it is less than a week when I will leave for London and then Australia, Jean.

October 25, 2003

This will probably be my last general post from Palestine. Only a few more days. The last few days have been interesting. On Thursday I went back again to Jayous, the place where we were tear gassed a couple of weeks ago. The farmers there are almost all completely cut off from their lands by the Wall. For one week some of them, including an elderly man, were trapped on the other side in their olive groves without access to food and water. The wire wall is quite high and food and water had to be thrown over when it happened that no soldiers were there and the farmers could get there to catch the food. Some people had cell phones but they don't work when they can't recharge the batteries. Personally, I hate the stupid phones. Everyone here in our house has one and it is always interrupting a conversation, a meeting or a meal. My phone has never worked properly and I hope I can get my \$100 US it cost me when I go back to Jerusalem.

When we got to Jayous the women had not arrived at the meeting place, but as always we are a curiosity to folks on the street and some men invited us to have tea with them in front of a house. It is interesting to see a lot of men sitting or standing around but you always see women either going somewhere, or working in their homes. Is this universal?

Finally the women arrived and we walked down the very steep gravel road to the Wall gate. There were quite a lot of news media there including CBS from San Francisco. They were filming us as we walked down and found the gate locked and no army around. The women lined up in front of the gate with their signs in Arabic and English saying how the wall was affecting the lives of their families.

Soon the army arrived and the women moved a bit away

from the gate, and then the men rushed forward and started shouting at the soldiers. Of course the US media jumped in and started filming close up hoping for some 'real action.' The soldiers almost immediately opened the gate trying to show the world how benevolent they were. The men went through to their groves wondering, I am sure, whether they would get home that night.

A lot of people who were left engaged in conversation with the soldiers. There was one young man who said he was 18 who had a very nice looking face, however he became the worst person there, and yelled and shouted at everyone who spoke to him. I stayed back from the fray as there are times not to get involved in something that will go nowhere. I happened to overhear a conversation with one of the reporters and one of the ISM women and he said he was from the *Toronto Star* so when there was a break I spoke to him, telling him I was from Canada. If anyone sees his stories, his name is Mitch Potter. I wrote to him asking for anything he has written.

The day passed without further incident as far as I know, but the soldiers locked the gate again and I don't know whether they opened it at 6pm or not. By that time it is quite dark outside. We came back home.

Yesterday, Friday, I had a great day. I finally went to the village of Marda to photograph a family I had met and get them to draw or write on the 12in. squares of cloth that I am going to make into a small quilt. They are an extended family who live in about 6 houses close to each other and they have lots of children who are so sweet. They all greeted and hugged me when I arrived, and of course I got food and drinks. I shed a few tears when I left them at almost dark, nearly 5 pm. They did not have a car so I had to go down over the roadblock and hitch home. It isn't very far away from Hares where I live, but too far to walk along the highway in the dark.

I almost immediately got a ride with an Israeli man. He said, 'Who left you here?' Meaning who left me on the road in front of a Palestinian village. I said I had been visiting friends who could not drive me home because of the roadblock in their village. Then when I told him where I lived he said, 'Aren't you afraid to live in an Arab village?'

I told him I am not afraid of very much anymore, and that people have been very kind to me. I said when you reach my age what good does it do to be afraid. He was quiet for a minute while we looked towards the beautiful sunset and I told I would like to paint it, to which he replied 'God gives us a beautiful painting every night'.

Nice ending to my day as I walked up the hill to our house. Love and greetings to you all, Jean.

October 27, 2003: Really this is the last one!

The last two days have been so interesting that I just had to write again. Yesterday, Saturday no other house members had time to do this so I decided I would go on my own to Jbarra to pick olives. This place is not all that far from here but you have to take three taxis to get there. I was quite brave going that far on my own. I was supposed to arrive there at 10:30am because some people from Israel were to join us. Jbarra is completely cut off from their groves by the wall which is closed most of the time.

At 8:30am when I went up past the roadblock to our village, a taxi offered me a ride to the next roadblock for 10 shekels and I thought that a bit much so I said no and walked across the road. To my surprise and delight a Palestinian bus arrived. We have had no busses for three weeks, so I jumped on, paid the fare, one shekel, and sat down on the comfortable seat. When I arrived at the roadblock there was a big crowd of people waiting and when they saw the bus they all looked so happy and before I could go down the steps they were crowding on. The next leg of the trip took longer as I got into a service which is cheaper than a taxi but they wait until it is full. After 40 minutes we left and traveled over a very bumpy, rocky and hilly road to Azun, then I got another taxi for Jbarra checkpoint where I was to meet the people I would be picking with.

However the soldiers were not letting anyone through the checkpoint. They just said no even though some women were going to the doctor and had a sick child. I didn't like to walk through when they couldn't but finally decided to try and the soldier said no to me at first, then sent me to a second soldier, who sent me to a third. He searched my bag for the bomb he said I might have and let me through. Just as I started walking up the Jbarra road, seven large busses passed through from Israel without a stop and went around the corner and up the hill to Jbarra. 350 Israelis had arrived to pick olives. It was an event. Everyone who is anyone was there including Uri Averbach who writes good stuff on the internet, and Gila Svirsky who is organizing the Israeli part of the Womens Human Rights March happening in December.

We immediately were assigned a place to pick and off we went. I met so many interesting people and it made me happy to talk to some really good Israelis, after all the only other contact I have had is with the people from Rabbis for Peace who are not all that great some of the time and of course the police and soldiers, who I don't exactly love.

I met an ex-Canadian couple who have lived here for about 30 years on a kibbutz who are really against the occupation and the wall and want to move back to Canada, as they are sick of the way things are going here. I then got into a conversation with a man named David who was so concerned that it took me two hours to get to Jbarra that he offered me a ride home in his car. We stopped picking at 3:30pm and a dear young Palestinian man helped me up the hill by taking my arm and pulling me. It was amazing as we traveled at the speed of light—well almost.

We had not had any food since breakfast and at the top they served Coca Cola and oranges and water. I was pretty hungry but we had to wait until the men made speeches and they were translated into either Arabic or Hebrew. It was all gobbledy gook to me as everyone seemed to be talking to each other all the while. It was getting dark by then and I was a bit worried as I could not see the man who offered me a ride, but I got on one of the busses and hoped. He soon arrived and off we went to Tel Aviv, and stopped at the train station where David's car was parked. One of his neighbours was standing by his car hoping for a lift home and I saw her looking at me with a kind of fear. We set off and she did not speak all the way to the Green Line and when we got there she said she wanted out. I wondered why and David said she was afraid to enter the Occupied Territories at night so she stood alone on the road for about 20 minutes while David delivered me to our house and went back. How sad that she was afraid of Palestinians when I have found

them so kind.

This morning I went to Marda alone again to pick olives with a family whose grove is by the road. Today is the first day of Ramadan and for 30 days people do not eat or drink water all day until the sun sets and then they feast. I found only an old man and his daughter there, the three sons had slept-in. (I think I would be inclined to do that if I had to fast all day.) We picked for about an hour until two sons arrived and one spoke English very well.

We were right on the edge of the road when a jeep arrived with four soldiers who said we must not pick there and to go home. I tried to negotiate by saying it would only take us 15 minutes to finish the small tree which was loaded with olives. They said no, go back. While the brother was negotiating I picked a lot of olives but then the soldier started yelling at me. I told him to speak more quietly and that I could be his grandmother. He rolled his eyes back and said loudly, 'Go away!' and then drove off.

I told the family that I would pick until they came back and I did but it was not long before they arrived with reinforcements so the family said that our lives were more precious than the olives and we moved back. The trees away from the road had hardly any olives and the family were feeling the effects of no food or water and sat down to rest. By then I was ready to drink water and the sun was very hot again, so decided it was okay to leave and stood out on the road and hailed a taxi home. The two taxis cost five shekels each—a good morning's work. Love to you all, Jean

Afterward

Here I am in wonderful Brisbane Australia, visiting with my dear friend Karl Erik. What a beautiful yard he has and an old Queensland type house, high ceilings, wood walls and big verandah across the front. And the birds in the yard, minahs, crows and ones I can't see but hear, and yesterday a bush turkey walked through, and today a large lizard. Today we will go to the Botanical Gardens and are now at the University using the computers in his office. I am feeling ok after a fall I had on the way to the airport in Jerusalem, smashed both knees and my nose, a perfect 3-point landing, ouch! I was very exhausted on leaving. The flight was very long and instead of staying in a hotel in London, I slept in the airport with all the young people. Pushed beyond the endurance level, but have definitely regained my mouth and am probably talking poor KE's head off. Hope all are well and will try to write some of you individual letters in a few days. I need some time to hang out. Love Jean ✍