

LETTER FROM JERUSALEM BY VÉRA MURRAY



One has only to climb the hill of Abu Tor, ten minutes from the centre of Jerusalem, to see in a single glance one of the most memorable landscapes in the world...

In the distance lie the mountains of Moab, the hollow of the Dead Sea, and the desert of Judea; closer at hand can be seen the valley of Cedron, the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane and the al-Aqsa Mosque. The ramparts of the old city are in a "no man's land"; here, from 1948 to 1967 lay the frontier between two enemy states – Jordan and the young Jewish state of Israel.

It was as impenetrable a frontier as that which still exists in Berlin. No Israeli had access to the Wailing Wall, Jewry's most venerated site, until the end of the Six Day War in June 1967; a hysterical crowd rushed towards it. Israel conquered and occupied the whole of the West Bank, including the Old City which had been in the hands of the Palestinians.

Israel's territory is very small – in some spots only twenty kilometres wide. And for a few years after the war these areas of biblical beauty were part of what Israelis considered their home. Israelis went there for picnics and to make exotic purchases – and they often behaved not as visitors but as if they owned the place. But little by little, as Palestinian resistance grew, the Israelis began once again to draw back into their territory and their claustrophobia. Today, after six months of violent uprisings in the occupied territories, the imaginary frontier is back in place.

In the Abu Tor district, the Jews living on En Rogel street, in the former no man's land, never set foot in the Arab village three hundred metres down the road.

Every day, from the terrace of the cinema built on the side of Abu Tor, Jewish intellectuals admire the magnificent panorama of the Old City as if it were the backdrop in a theatre. Most of them have not been there for years. It is only the Orthodox Jews who still visit the Wailing Wall. Obligated by religious duty, they go by the safest possible route. Near the ramparts a group of Israeli schoolchildren goes for a walk in the direction of the Arab villages; they are accompanied by guards armed with sub-machine guns. As a foreigner I visit the Old City regularly without ever encountering any danger, and my Israeli acquaintances treat me as either a fool or a heroine for doing so.

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One can easily live in Jerusalem – and this is even truer of Tel Aviv – without having to concern oneself with what goes on in the occupied territories. Many Israelis have never set foot in them. An Israeli journalist confided to me that "In their minds it's as far away as the Himalayas." They keep to pre-1967 Israel, and with a greater feeling of security because their country is now protected by a buffer controlled by the Israeli army. Those who do go regularly to the West Bank admire the space and the beauty, without paying any attention to the inhabitants or ever really talking to one of them. Others live there and buy a low-priced bungalow, but act as if the

local population didn't exist. Still others, with Bible in hand as if it were a kind of property deed become outright colonizers and arrogant neighbours for the Arab villagers. In their own eyes all they are doing is reclaiming Jewish land which their ancestors cultivated more than two thousand years ago.

After six months of *intifadah* it is no longer possible to ignore the Palestinians. First adolescents and then women and children have taken to throwing stones at Israeli soldiers and at the armed settlers. They have even killed some. A single Israeli death weighs heavily in the balance compared to dozens of Palestinian deaths. That number rises daily, but it is an abstract figure which arouses little emotion in Israel.

As far as Israelis are concerned, it is quite simply a matter of their survival. The death of one Jew provokes a national psychosis, a deep-seated feeling of insecurity.

A minority of left-wing intellectuals asks disturbing questions for which they have no answers. Encounters with my Israeli friends are no longer enjoyable, for inevitably they pour out to strangers their depression and their guilt. They take part in demonstrations and they sign petitions; the men await with profound distress their annual call-up as army reservists. What if they find themselves holding a loaded machine gun facing a group of Palestinians?

According to public opinion polls Israelis fall into two groups. One half, like Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, is not willing to yield an inch and refuses to negotiate with the Palestinians. The other half supports the plan put forward by US Secretary of State George Shultz, which involves negotiating with the Palestinians to partition the territories. But what sort of solution is this? The most that the Israeli doves are willing to concede does not come close to the basic minimum demanded by the Palestinians. There can be no question of giving back all the territory that was taken in 1967, particularly the Golan, or of returning to the previous state of insecurity, to sleepless nights in the frontier kibbutzim subject to attacks by Palestinian commandos.

In their camps in the West Bank, in Gaza, or in Lebanon, the Palestinian refugees pass on to their children and grandchildren the legend of the old country; they dream of their orange groves and the homes left in Israel, and of places where in fact every trace of their existence has long since been obliterated. Two peoples lay claim to the same land and violence widens the gap between them still further. □

(Translation by Mary Taylor)

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