

4-29-04

Dear Roy,

Here is installment number five. It should be the last.

On the plane back on Friday, March 26, I scribbled a little page in my notebook entitled: Why Bethlehem? Why did we decide to spend the last few days of our trip in Bethlehem? We could have gone to Tel Aviv or another Mediterranean site and bask in the sun. Beverly first got the notion of spending some time in close proximity to the Palestinians. Bethlehem seemed perfect because we would have some acquaintance with it on 3/21. Further, Rachael – the Lutheran deaconess – was planning to spend several weeks with a family in Bethlehem. She felt certain that they would be ideal people to visit -- and possibly even stay overnight. So our plans jelled about 3/19 and I made arrangement with Naim to provide transportation to Bethlehem after our one day trip to the Dead Sea. We planned to hook up with Rachael at the Bethlehem Star Hotel on Tuesday evening.

Well, Tuesday afternoon, we were driving with Tony in his van back toward Bethlehem. Our conversation with T was periodically interrupted by calls to his cell phones. He must have had four or five phone devices. Needless to say, we understood none of what his conversation. It turns out that at least some of his calling was to coordinate our entry into Bethlehem.

When we finally got to the intersection where we were to cross to the Bethlehem checkpoint, we were surprised – foolishly --- to see that the road was barricaded. There was no checkpoint. Our driver according to his plan --- which we did not know --- just turned right and drive about a mile or two as he explained that we would have to meet another car to get to Bethlehem.

After driving a short distance, we parked our car. We got out with Tony and took our bags to another van with another driver. We drove off. As we cross a bridge, I realized that we were taking the bridge we had seen on Sunday from the roof of the University of Bethlehem. It was the road from the Gilo settlement to Beit Jala. The road was for Israelis. Oh well, we were tourists.

When we had reached the barricade, we were within 2 minutes of the hotel. Tony said I could see it from that intersection. Sorry, Tony, I had been fixated on the barricade. Traveling on in this second van, we came to another spot where we stopped. Everyone, but the driver, got out. We took our bags and, standing there in Beit Jala with Tony, the van drove off.

To the east where we believed we were headed, there were several interesting things. To the right was a tall gray tower with some small windows at the top. I had seen them in pictures of the Wall. The Wall was not here but would be sometime in the future. Directly in front of us was a hill that could not be seen over. It was made of rocks and rubble. In retrospect, they had gone through here clearing out something. Home? To

the left and down the street were two very pricey houses. I had not seen any residential real estate in Israel except condo developments. For many buildings, one could not be certain if they were commercial or being used as dual purpose, commercial and residential. These houses were unlike anything I have ever seen. Big and, like I said, pricey looking. There were stone walls around them. Tony volunteered that the closest one was owned by an Arab who was in the stone business. Again, as I said, everything around was made of stone like like we see wood.

Finally after a couple minutes (I am not certain what for), Tony directed Bev and I to start up the hill in front of us. As we ascended, two or three people came over the hill. One was a woman carrying a child. For some reason, I know that I helped steady her as she took a big step down. The man I thought she was with must have just been another Arab. He was far away when I looked back. I don't know whether they waited there or walked on.

When we got to the top of the hill we were able to view quite a bit. On the other side of the hill, there were probably 15 or 20 cabs. All Arab cabbies waiting for passengers. Tony told us not to say anything. As we figured out, this was one of the two main ways into Bethlehem when the checkpoint was blocked. (In fact a newsletter we received after returning spoke of this and another way into Bethlehem from Beit Jala. We stood and just waited. Finally, the van arrived that Tony was waiting for. We all piled into the van and were off again.

This time, I think we drove about 10 minutes and we were back in familiar territory. We arrived in front of the Bethlehem Star --- a place we had visited on Sunday. We got out and went in. We signed in with the desk clerk, Ammid. Tony and the driver left after we reconfirmed our arrangements for Friday morning 12:30AM pickup. Tony gave me his card and several phone numbers.

Well, we got in the small elevator and went up to our 4th floor room. When we got there, we found that the lights in the hall were not on. So we found the switch. At some point here we decided that we were the only residents of the entire hotel. (I believe the owner had an apartment. A couple days later we saw a woman who might have been the wife working – cleaning – on a south side balcony. A Mercedes was always parked at the front of the hotel.) The room was fine. Nothing too much different than US motels. However, things were a little older.

Oh, yes. The shower was quite small. No problem. The deadbolt locks were always locked twice. Remember tic toc double lock. Well as in the Jerusalem room, we found that the maids always turned the key around twice – pushing the deadbolt farther into the slot. We never got hot water in the room until we asked for it. Things were pretty well shut down.

The view was great. Here is a shot of the view from our room.



We could see the Church of the Nativity in the distance. That mound on the horizon – in the very middle of the picture – is the Herodian fortress. As we said before, there were quite a few Christian churches in Bethlehem. Nevertheless, the call to prayer was heard very clearly five times a day – starting at 4 AM. A car is visible on a road to the lower right. That road went right by the back of our hotel.

Well, we unpacked a little and went out to eat. We were wanting to see if the restaurant in the hotel to the south of us was open. It was getting dark. I suppose it was 6:30 PM. The walk to that hotel was probably 2 hundred yards. The road passing the hotel east and west could be seen as being dark already. Not much activity during these three days of mourning for Yassin. Shops were closed. Ultimately the hotel restaurant was closed and we saw the door to that hotel opened only once while we were there. There were no occupants in that hotel – larger than ours.

Back up a minute. As we approached that hotel from ours, a stone hit the pavement somewhere behind us and skidded on by. It apparently had been thrown by some young kids (Bev thought they were preteen, I believe.) we had seen just as we left the hotel. Well, that was that. Nothing else happens of that nature throughout the visit. No other overt aggression.

Finding that the restaurant was closed, we went to a grocery store just across the street from that hotel other hotel. There we were able to buy Pringles, pita bread (enough for a week), sandwich meat, and stuffed olives. I guess we stocked up on water and a Coke.

With a few more purchases at that store (run by Christian Arabs), we managed every evening meal in our hotel room – Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Heading back for our hotel, we saw no one.

As we ate and watched TV in our room, we learned about the stuffed olives of Palestine. They stuffed the olives with little peppers. Hot!!!!!!!. Pull the pepper out and the olive still was a little hot. Something different.

TV was mostly Arab. CNN had the news in English. Oh yes, I think we saw some US shows with Arabic sub-titles. We watched some Congressional hearings. But we also saw the new head of Hamas. A gentleman by the name of Rantissi. Abdel-Aziz al-Rantissi according to the Internet. I believe we saw him on Wednesday night and Thursday night. He said the same thing both times in English “I am against the Zionists; I am not against the US.” I couldn’t believe it. I hear the same report again and that is what I heard. It gave me some hope that something was changing. I do not believe that I heard this about Rantissi once I got back here. Whatever I heard, it made no difference. Rantissi is history. Another assassination. Back to the trip.

At this point, I will include a picture that I took on Sunday. It shows our hotel. The



photo was one of the ones taken from the roof of the University of Bethlehem. In the picture is a red arrow pointing at the hotel. A green arrow points at the road that led from the hotel to the University. So you see we were quite close. Tennis courts are at the

right. (Technical note: When I edited the picture to add the arrows, the stone building became more yellow than they are actually seen in the photo. You won't mind, right?)

The morning of March 24, we got up and, according to what we were told at the front desk, went upstairs to the fifth floor ballroom for breakfast. We walked up. There were saw a room full of tables with chairs stacked on top of them. Looks like nothing is going to happen here. Whoops. There was one table by the west windows with a blue and white checkered table cloth. There were two cups there. I figured out where the kitchen was and went there. Sure enough. A man was standing looking out of an open window having a smoke. He was our chef. He took us back to the table and came back about three times with pita bread, hard boiled eggs, coffee, some vegetables, olives. It was different, but fine. This was the kind of service we got on Wednesday and Thursday. I'll bet that was the only work that man would get all day. There was a different man each day.

The desk clerk was at the Bethlehem Star regularly. We talked to him on Thursday out on the street across from the hotel. Ammid had taken some training at the Univ. of Bethlehem in hotel management. However, the job he had was a sign of his holding on by his fingertips. His shift was 3 PM to 7 AM every day. He said that before the Intifada things were good. Now he was happy to have the job. As we said, unemployment was obvious. Lots of men standing around. Cabs were pestering you all the time. Want a ride. Souvenir vendors were really tough to shake.

Leaving the hotel on Wednesday morning, our first destination was the University of Bethlehem. After the rock last evening, we thought we could get some advice from the Christian Brothers. On the way out of the hotel, a man came up wanting us to go to his shop across the street to buy something. He name-dropped saying he was a friend of Tony whom he knew had brought us to the hotel. We put him off, but later we did see him and went in. I believe that was later on Wednesday morning. We bought about 4 little olive wood crib sets for the grandchildren. We never saw that shop open again as long as we were there. Remember shops should have been closed till Thursday.

Well, after we got out of the hotel we walled the short distance to the University. At the front gate, there were some guards or people checking who was coming in. We asked to talk to Brother Cyril. It must have been the right question, because we were escorted toward one of the main buildings. We walked by a lot of students who were in a rally – I don't know if classes were suspended because of the assassination. However, at the center of the rally was a black tent and in front of the tent was a wheelchair (symbolizing Yassin). Some young man was at a microphone giving a firey speech. Inside the building, things were quieter, but you could still hear the loud speakers.

At Brother Cyril's office, we asked to see him. A secretary went to talk to him and came back to usher us in. We talked for about 10 minutes. He was very helpful. He believed we would not have any problems staying in Bethlehem. He was surprised that a rock had been thrown. I don't remember any restrictions on our movements that he recommended. With his assurances, we felt better. Otherwise, we would have called Tony to get us out

again -- somehow. (In retrospect, I believe that getting out [at that point](#) would have been as easy as getting in the night before.)

We left and walked back to our hotel and then to the International Center – the Lutheran place – where we had visited on Sunday. We looked again at the art and music areas. We stopped in their store and bought some ornaments and things as souvenirs – mostly Christmas stuff.

As I recall, we then retracted our steps to the University to go to Mass at noon. Well, the church on campus was in the administration building that Brother Cyril was in. The inside walls of that chapel were decorated with angelic little children. The chapel was named Chapel of the Divine Child. The children represented the Holy Innocents.

There was not more than 10 people at Mass on this day. One of them was Sister Patricia whom we met on Sunday. So after Mass, we reconnected with her and she invited us back for Thursday for Mass and then lunch. As we left the administration building this second, and last time for Wednesday, I saw in the middle of the campus two rows of young Muslim men arranged for their midday prayer.

We went out the gate and bought a bag of raw green things that would remind you of green beans in taste and looked like an unshelled lima bean. We had seen these sold by vendors for the last few days. They were actually immature almonds. If the green pod was opened, you'd find something that, if left to mature, would be an almond. They weren't the greatest; but at least we had tried them. We ate most of them eventually.

But now, it was about 1:30 and we went for lunch. There was a small restaurant just about 50 yards from the Univ. entrance. We had to step down to go in. We each bought a Coke and a falafal sandwich (a piece of pita (pocket bread) filled with whatever they had available) and sat down. About 5 minutes into lunch the shooting started. I will never know if the shots were small arms or firecrackers. All I know is that students from the street came into the restaurant in a hurry. Well, I stood up kind of slowly. The shooting had stopped. I looked out of the window that was a long narrow thing about five feet off the floor of the restaurant (slightly below street level). A vehicle with some sort of antenna waving drove off in the direction of our hotel. However, I didn't pay any attention to it because right outside the window there was a tall man getting into another vehicle. He wore a white-checked Arab headdress. You've probably seen pictures. His face was completely covered!! I sat down slowly. (Yes, I should have hit the floor.)

Finally, I asked the man behind the counter who had just served us what was going on. He held a TV remote control and was concentrating on changing channels on the TV across the room. He didn't seem concerned. He said, "Don't worry. They were just leaving." I wonder if that fellow and others were in the demonstration that was still going on at the Univ. Neither Bev nor I had noticed.

Well, let me mention that the rest of the day was less eventful. Bev and I went back to the Church of the Nativity. There we met a young man named Jiries Canavati in front of St. Catherine's. He was a guide and shop owner. However, he claims to have been among the group of Palestinians who were inside the Church of the Nativity during the 2002 40-day standoff. He had a lot of stories. We talked while his cute little daughter (5-6 years) played hide-and-seek with a Franciscan who might have been related to Jiries.

Bev and I stood out. There weren't any tourists around.

Inside of St. Catherine's, we found that there was a passage that started in the back of that church and went down under the Church of the Nativity. The old Franciscan whom we had seen before --- probably the watch person -- gave us the nod that we could go down. There was a series of rooms down there. There was a technical description and dating display as we entered. The last chamber -- now just an empty chapel (I wish I could remember the wall appearance) --- was supposed to be the place where St. Jerome worked to create the Vulgate. (Just checked the Encyclopedia. After being Bishop of Antioch and then spending time in Rome, Jerome settled in the Bethlehem area in 386.)

We revisited some of the chambers of the Church of the Nativity that were rather busy during the Sunday visit. We walked down the Milk Grotto Street. We visited the "Milk Grotto" which is a place to which miracles are attributed. More about that sometime.

Walking on we reached St. Joseph Street. We met a little French nun who was 80-something. Very little. She belonged to a convent along this street and had been in Bethlehem for lots of years. Neat.

We headed back to the hotel. We probably stocked up a little more for our meal in the hotel room. But we spent the evening watching TV news again and picking the peppers out of the olives.

Oh yes, before I end this day, I thought I would include another picture taken Sunday. We only saw this Sunday from the bus on the way to the refugee camp. It is PLO Headquarters after Bethlehem's 2002 problems. Fills up the page.



March 25

Some things today can be dittos of yesterday. We arose in the morning and had our breakfast upstairs.

I can't recall how early, but we started off for Beit Sahour. Like in all the books, I probably have spelled the names of towns multiple different ways. I believe I've seen this spelled without the "o". Anyway, we went by the Manger Square post office and dropped off all the postcards with the beautiful stamps. No one has received a card as far as we know. But maybe that will work like the Chicago post office. They may be floating around somewhere. Wait 6 months.

The day was nice a sunny and warm. Most days were completely sunny. I would speculate that the distance to our farthest point was about 4 miles -- 1 hour with gawking. We were going to go to the Shepherds Field(s) of Beit Sahour.

It is interesting just walking along. I know. The comparison of Old Jerusalem to the this West Bank is sort of like Hammond (good and bad -- when we were young) and New Elliot on the way to Aunt Lizzie's back then. However, we had no problems. We asked for directions at least once. Cabs drove by and tooted.

When we got there, the Greek Orthodox Church seemed to be totally locked. We were unable to enter its grounds. Within the grounds there were supposed to be displays commemorating the Shepherds and the history of the area. (Similar grounds were to the north of here -- about a mile? -- run by the Franciscans. Competing fields. O, well.) Further there was a sign the prohibited women without skirts. Bev had worn slacks.

So we started back to Bethlehem to the west. It was considerably higher than Beit Sahour. About a block away was a group of one man and two women planting a field. Another older man (probably the other man's father) was sitting on a sidewalk. He said that they were planting cucumbers. The man planting was actually plowing the field with a plow dragged behind a horse!!!!!! The women were planting by hand. Our man on the sidewalk proudly said that they had been organic gardening for 180 years.

When the man on the sidewalk found that we could not go into the church because Bev needed a skirt, he offered to go to his house and get Bev one. We had seen the Fields as far as we were concerned and thank him. No, no skirt was needed. As we left him sitting there, he commented on the political situation. He swore in English and said, "We have to get rid of the radicals!!!"

On our way back we spoke to a young lady who was a college student at some other West Bank institution. Also, we walked by a factory (actually a glass storefront) where we saw multiple rows of men setting and working at sewing machines.

We saw small 6 inch lizards on our walk.

We walked back up St. Joseph into Bethlehem. It was very steep. We reached Afan Street and then reached Milk Grotto. We sat and cooled down a little. We came upon a shop where we saw men working. (We were approaching Manger Square from the east.) They were making statues from olive wood. It was the factory of Jack Giacaman. He met us and gave us a tour. There were at least four men working in a sawdust filled shop. One was using a drill like a dentist's to cut the fingers into a statue. Another made two rough statues on a lathe that acted like a large key making machine. Jack showed us a wood pile of branches. Olive growers prune their trees and bring the branches and sell them.

Jack talked to us about the need to dry the wood. If you carved undried wood, the figures would crack as the wood lost its moisture. Actually he showed us wood that probably came from dry Judea. It grows slowly and its cross section shows many growth rings. However, the wood of Galilee shows few lines and grows fast – lots of drying necessary.

After leaving the factory, we went farther toward Manger Square. We met Jiries Canavati again. We went into his shop and bought a Jerusalem Cross for Beverly.

Then off to Mass at Bethlehem University. A British-sounding priest celebrated Mass. There were more people than on the previous day. After Mass, Sr. Patricia Crookfort – music teacher (both choral and instrumental) took us to lunch at what was “a 5-star restaurant”. It was the dining area of the University used for training of the Palestinians in culinary arts. We were first provided with a tuna salad on a wafer. Tuna with olives, tomatoes, topped with fresh dill. Then I thought we were done. But they brought out large pieces of chicken and rice. Delicious. Lastly, we got a sizable piece of cake.

After we left lunch we walked by many students outside the classroom buildings. Sr. Patricia said that within the Univ. males and females could talk. Culturally that was not permitted outside. We met one of her flute students – a nice looking young man. He had been a man wanted by the Israelis for something. He slept each day at a different place. He didn't phone his home for fear of the Israelis. Then somehow, he surmised that this infraction had been forgiven. But how to test that theory. Heart pounding – he went to a checkpoint. They detained him – checked his papers and let him through. Sr. Patricia had taken him under her wing earlier and had been praying for him.

That afternoon, we returned to Manger Square and visited a large museum. The main item of interest there was a large collection of crib sets. They were donated from all over the world. This exhibit had been present during the siege of 2002 and some items had been damaged or stolen.

We met a couple other tourists briefly. Everyone else was Palestinian. We met these two women as we left the museum. They were on some church mission by themselves. After some amount of talk it turned out that they were “Moonies”. Hum.

Back at the hotel we got organized and ready to leave. We tried to sleep a little. We had very little success.

March 26

Well, here we go. Since getting in to Bethlehem, we always knew that the exit might not be smooth.

This is just transcribed from what I wrote on the plane flying back. Maybe I'll make some digressions.

This is entitled THE GREAT ESCAPE.

Consider. This begins at 12:30 AM on Friday morning. We leave the hotel and get into a white van with two Palestinians. We drove out of Bethlehem and over to the empty streets of Beit Jala. We drove up to a dead end street. Our head lights lit a pile of rubble on a small knoll which was high enough that we could see nothing on the other side in the dark. Our drivers grabbed the bags and we were told to hurry up the mound. One of the drivers stood on a wire – I don't think it was barbed wire – so that we would not trip.

There was Tony. After paying the drivers \$20, we boarded Tony's van and left.

You know that Beit Jala was Arab and Har Gilo is an adjoining Israeli settlement. Tony told us that, for this segment of the trip, if asked we were to say that we were visiting Har Gilo. We were on the road for Israeli travel from Har Gilo.

We reached a checkpoint. Tony rolled down his window and gave his line to the soldier as he always did. Something in Hebrew like "Hello, guys, how are things going?" What happened next was that Tony was asked for his papers (Bev and I believe it was his license and taxi permit.) Whatever they were, the soldiers checked them somewhere for about 5 minutes. (Bev and I said novenas.) The soldiers came back and flashed flashlights in our faces. A soldier handed Tony his papers and we were off.

Down the road a piece, was another checkpoint. We were told that if asked we had come from Jerusalem. We were off the Gilo road. All I fixed on were the two soldiers. One seemed unarmed. The other stood several feet beyond in our headlights with his automatic weapon. The window went down. Tony said his words and we were waved through. I was relieved.

However, we hadn't reached the main highway. To my dismay, another checkpoint appeared. This seemed to be a more major one. A command post of sorts was off to the left. Tony's window went down and Tony said his piece. We were pointed to pull off. We moved the van up so the headlights illuminated two soldiers in a jeep. Two other soldiers – one Ethiopian – roamed with their rifles. First they took Tony's papers. Minutes ticked by. A soldier came and asked for our passports. Again he left and came back. I believe he talked to Tony. Then he walked around the front of the van and opened our side door. He said "Good day". In good English – I do not recall an accent – he inquired where we were coming from. Jerusalem. Why were you there? Visiting

holy sites. Where did you stay? The Lutheran Guest House in the Old City. Lies to a man in his mid-twenties with an automatic weapon on his back.

He then asked me to get out and identify my luggage. I got out and went to the back of the van. Opening the doors, I pointed to Bev's and my bag. Not knowing if that was satisfactory, I walked slowly back and got into the van. Shortly thereafter, he came to the door and returned our passports. The door was closed. We were off to the major highway to Tel Aviv and Ben Gurion Airport.

Tony told us, as we left that checkpoint, that another van we saw parked at that checkpoint was his also. Tony had received a call 20 minutes earlier when the Arab driver of that van was approaching that checkpoint. He was still being detained. Tony said with some emotion that there is a distinct difference in the examinations which the Israelis imposed on the Arabs.

Once at the airport, our baggage check was no cakewalk either. Actually, the luggage was sent through. However, I was taken aside and my carry-on bag was thoroughly checked. Everything was taken out of every pocket. Books were gone through very carefully. Envelopes and manila folders were opened and the pages were separated. A conjecture was that they were looking for very thin shape devices or letter bombs. Who knows? One of the ladies would leave on Monday morning with the regular tour people had great difficulty getting a pamphlet back which she had purchased at the Sabeel Center. It discussed suicide bombers. I don't think I had anything that radical, yet I did have material from Sabeel and other things that originated with the peace movement.

Well, that's it. Enough intrigue for a while.

May 23, 2004