

## Maryse and Jane's Visit to Yanoun, Occupied Palestinian Territories

February 2015

*\*To read more about our visit to Yanoun, go to our blog at <https://janeharries.wordpress.com/>*

We found our beloved little Yanoun (circa 15 kilometres South East of Nablus in the Northern West Bank) showing the first signs of Spring. Tiny little red anemones and pink clematis dotted the hillside as we did our morning and evening protective presence walks. Rashed's broad beans formed a green floor in the valley. Yet it was cold, bitterly cold – and by the end of our visit we had had a fall of snow, putting an end to Rashed's crop for another year. He talked of each family being supplied with greenhouses, but we wondered how long those would last, being such an invitation to vandalism by the settlers.



In some respects the village looks the same. Yet we are aware of a slow and seemingly irreversible decline. There are more settlement buildings and even a complete new outpost (illegal even under Israel law) out past Lower Yanoun towards the Jordan Valley. The latest development the villagers talked about is that the settlers now also have cattle – not something we connect with our normal image of the Holy Land.



Because of the progressive appropriation of land by the settlers, all families now have problems since there is not enough land to graze their sheep and goats on. As a result, sheep and goats are taken out twice a day for one to two hours at most, and the families have to supplement their animals' diet by buying fodder - 5,000 kilos a month for the whole village, which costs 1,300 Shekels (around £219). This used to be only necessary in winter. Most families are in debt, and are selling sheep to pay for the fodder. Rashed's herd, for instance, has

gone down from 80 to 50 sheep. It doesn't need a mathematician to see that this isn't sustainable in the longer term.

Another side-effect to having to keep the animals inside longer is that they are more susceptible to infection. Najiha told us that over the past few years the herds have suffered because of illness, including chlamydia, causing the sheep to abort early, losing lambs. This also meant vet's fees to treat the condition.

We are shocked once again by the harsh conditions the people live in. All the houses seem to be letting in water to some extent, and are desperately cold. We visit Huda and Najeh, and she shrugs as she looks at the bare walls as if to say "What can I do?" Most families have a metal stove on legs (a 'dafaya') in which the villagers burn olive wood and husks, and this provides a warm focal point for families, but Huda and Najeh don't even have this – just a brazier with hot coals. We are invited for a beautiful lunch with them, at the end of which she asks if she can move the brazier next door: we realise that her teenage children are there, and that they have no heat at all.



During our visit Nasser Arafat, an architect from Nablus, visits the village to look at two houses which we have money to repair. As he visits Adla's house, where 3 old ladies live, we see an expression of disbelief come over his face. "They really need a new house" he says. This is, of course, impossible. The people of Yanoun live in Area C, which is directly under Israeli control and building is forbidden without a permit, which is almost impossible to come by. 'Illegal' structures are often demolished. Repairing from inside is the only option.

During our visit we talked to as many of the young people as we could. Many are worried about their continuing university education or about school expenses such as transport and books because of lack of money. Maryse started compiling a list of each student and their needs so that we can set up a sponsorship scheme. Education is very highly valued, even though work on graduation is often hard to come by. It provides one source of hope for a better future.



### So what did we achieve?

During our stay we distributed the money kindly donated to us by Quakers in South Wales (an amazing total of 4,210 Shekels – the equivalent of £685.) This was distributed as follows:

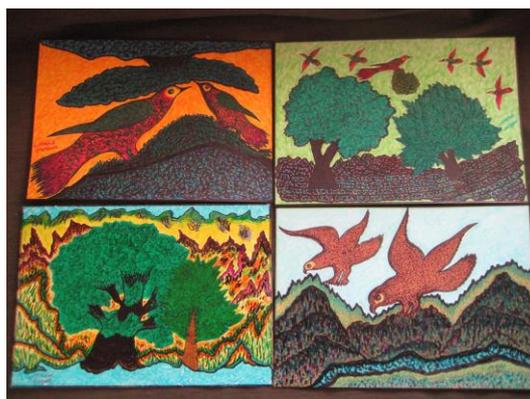
- 900 Shekels (£146) to Najeh (the artist of the village) for 3 of his paintings
- 600 Shekels (£98) to Najiha to buy a new swarm of bees to make honey
- 1,000 Shekels (£163) to Yasser and Wassfiya as a contribution towards the university education of their children (one studying Chemistry and the other Information Technology)
- 1,710 Shekels (£278) to Rashed to spend on fodder for the sheep in the village (for which we have received a receipt)

Following our visit, we are confident that 2 of the houses will be repaired very soon. This will be done through Friends of Nablus and Surrounding Area (FONSA), a Scottish charity with which we are linked, and our friend Nasser will oversee the work.

We are keen to set up a sponsorship scheme for university education for the young people, and Maryse has already made a start on compiling a list of students, what they are studying, where they are in their courses, and how much the fees are. If you are interested in sponsoring a student, please talk to Maryse!

We have brought 3 of Najeh's paintings back to Wales and wish to get people's opinions regarding their value – particularly that of artists.

Nasser Arafat encouraged us to write a letter to the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority (PA) whilst we were there, mentioning himself. (The PA oversees affairs in the Palestinian Territories, although its authority is limited to Areas A and B under the Oslo Accords, with Area C – 60% of the West Bank - being under Israeli control). This we did – and shortly after we returned we heard that there had been a delegation of 50 people from the PA who came to look at the village, and have promised to do work to the school and the road leading to Nablus. You never know where small actions may lead!



Our overall concern is for the sustainability of the village, as without vision and a long-term plan it will inevitably be taken over by the settlers. Maryse and I discussed and discussed this whilst we were there, and had lots of bright ideas. What about setting up a cultural centre in one of the unused houses, we thought – where Yanoun's story could be told, and the produce of the village – olive oil, soap, honey, embroidery, almonds – sold? What about looking for outlets through a Fair Trade cooperative? Could the women be taught how to wash, card and weave the wool from the sheep and make it into rugs and wall hangings? We ended up going round and round in circles, and coming back to the almost impossible position the village finds itself in. For any initiative needs to come from the people themselves, and they are so few, so beleaguered on every side, and living in the sort of conditions no-one in the UK would dream of enduring in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Without the Occupation, of course, things would be possible, but that isn't going away any time soon. We need

to know how the young people see their future, and also if possible to attract new people into the village. It is so difficult to see how things may develop or to feel very hopeful. Like so many internationals, we left Yanoun with very heavy hearts but also feeling a deep connection to the place and to the wonderful people who live there. We may have come as the bearers of material gifts, yet we left feeling spiritually enriched. Yanoun lives on in our hearts.

