

THE HOLY LAND

Violence is only too apparent in today's world and the media feeds us a constant smorgasbord of negativity. Israel has long been a 'hot spot' in this regard, and I found myself there in late 1977. I entered Israel from Jordan at the border crossing called the 'Allenby Bridge'. Other backpackers had cautioned me to inform the guards that I was only entering the West Bank which was the homeland of the Arab peoples, and not Israel. Of course, at that time, once you passed the checkpoint you were in the State of Israel, so they were only making the point. It was obvious how much tension was brewing just below the surface.

After a short journey of about an hour we saw the walls of the old city of Jerusalem for the first time. It was unbelievable to realise that ancient history was all around us, but it would have to wait because we were destined for a Kibbutz, which was to be our home for the next few months. This was a popular activity with travellers since it was a unique experience and was a springboard of opportunity to visit the country. For me, I was looking forward to seeing the Holy Land, but it was also a place where I could eat safe food and recover from living in Calcutta. Kibbutz 'Nir Eliyarnu' was located in a secure area north of Tel Aviv and had about a thousand people living there including about thirty volunteers from all over the world like me.

I was sharing my accommodation with Ken from South Africa, Ted from Canada and Dennis from Goulburn, Australia. We had some interesting discussions and finding out firsthand from Ken about the Apartheid Policy was informative but disturbing. All too soon we were put to work washing dishes for 1000 people in the dining room. It seemed that you no sooner finished than you had to start and do it all over again, but we entertained ourselves and ate meals like kings including pork which was thoughtfully included for our benefit at times. The Israelis kept largely to themselves unless you had been there at least six months and had gained their trust and confidence. It was sometime later we were able to pick out individuals who had been involved in the Entebbe Airport raid of July 4th 1976.

After the first week of dish washing, we were more than ready for a change and so we were rotated with the workers from the plastic factory. With a few essential instructions from the supervisor our labour commenced. We were amazed to see that after placing a large container of plastic pellets in a bin at one end, neat parcels of disposal plastic bags appeared at the end of the assembly line. Our job was to prepare individual packages, pop in the ties, seal them down with a heat bar and then place them into cardboard boxes ready for export. I remember being so bored after a few days of doing this that we decided to add some interest to the activity. We wrote on notepaper and placed the following message into some of the packages "We have been working for eight hours packaging these bags for you – please respond and let us know where this ended up." We never did get a reply.

Thankfully, after a week of working and dreaming about plastic bags we were moved on to the chicken farm. It seemed that the longer we stayed, the jobs became less mundane, and we were given more responsibility. Those of us who had most shown their worth were entrusted with the children at the nursery. We were soon given our schedules and were surprised to find that we began our shift at three o'clock in the morning. The chicken sheds were operated with precision like everything on the Kibbutz. Upon entering the large shed housing 40,000 chickens, we walked through a sterilized solution, put on clean overalls, a hair net and a mask to cover our nose and mouth. It sure seemed obvious that humans could be quite hazardous to young chickens. We were then exposed to the sight of thousands of chirping chickens visible

in the ultraviolet light and our job was to usher them forward so that they dropped on to a conveyer belt to loaded containers. Even though we had masks on, it was still smelly, dusty work. Using the Kibbutz system, the Israelis were able to turn desert into fertile ground which grew such crops as oranges. Whenever the temperature dropped to zero, computer sensors turned on the water sprinklers to prevent frost damage.

In contrast the Arab sectors were deprived, and the land was barren. I had become accustomed to the media portraying Israel as the 'good guys' and was quite shocked to find refugee camps housing up to 40,000 forgotten, displaced Palestinians. On one occasion, I was invited to one of their homes in the camp and I found the people to be unbelievably friendly and hospitable even though they were desperately poor. We decided to spend Christmas Day in the predominantly Arab town of Bethlehem. To capture the full atmosphere we walked from Jerusalem which turned out to be about two hours away.

Soon, I entered the Nativity Church and eventually made my way down narrow winding stairs to a small altar which reputedly marks the very spot where Jesus was born. I was there but a few minutes trying to capture the special meaning of this place when the quietness was broken by a noisy gaggle of overweight tourists. They were obviously very rich with all the latest 35 mm cameras and were wearing gaudy clothing. The guide rushed through her spiel. "This is the most sacred site in all of Chrisodem – the very birthplace of Jesus Christ." When she had finished cameras flashed madly and in no time at all – they were gone. The shallowness of this left me shaking my head until a second group of much poorer tourists made their way down the stairs. They were African Americans, and their cameras were very simple, in fact one didn't work at all. The group stood in silence for quite some time and then they spontaneously sang in four part harmony and eventually they were gone. I thought: "now I know what this holy site is all about." I placed my hand on the metal star on the floor which marked the birthplace of Jesus and then took my own picture.

I then decided to go to the Post Office to send a letter to my family dated 25th December 1977 – Bethlehem. When I arrived there, I noticed some of the volunteers from the Kibbutz were sitting around on the floor with bored looks on their faces. They had decided that this would be a warm place to hang out and having no interest in Christianity they had been disappointed that the Nativity Church was the only tourist attraction. I left them mulling over their wasted hours and went to Manger Square to listen to the choir. They were singing 'Silent Night' when the peaceful evening was shattered by the sound of a huge explosion which seemed to be less than a hundred metres away. The choir slurred on their note momentarily but incredibly continued singing. But people were running everywhere in mad confusion and panic. No one seemed to know where the explosion had taken place and the Israelis had quickly cordoned off the square. Word spread that a hand grenade had been thrown but I saw no sign of where it had taken place. After quite some time and a number of body searches, order was restored, and I proceeded to watch midnight mass televised on the outdoor screen conveniently erected for those who could not squeeze inside the church.

Eventually, my enjoyable stay on the Kibbutz came to an end and I bid farewell to my newfound friends and co-workers. I was then able to find accommodation in the upper floor of a small hotel located right inside the old city of Jerusalem. Every day I would venture out to learn about the wonders of such well known sites as Gethsemane, the Dome of the Rock and the Wailing Wall. It was at this time that President Sadat of Egypt made his momentous journey of peace to the Holy City. Incredibly, I watched that motorcade pass by the narrow

street below the small hotel where I was staying. But I left the highlight of my stay until the end – the journey along the Via Dolorosa which traces the journey of Christ to Calvary.

It was Friday and a large crowd were edging along the crowded cobbled alley making the Stations of the Cross. I think I got to about the station where Jesus falls down and decided that I needed a break from the crowd. Besides, I was disappointed that I wasn't in the correct frame of mind to absorb the right atmosphere of this special time. I entered one of the souvenir shops which lined the narrow lane way and asked the short Arab owner the cost of his slide package thinking that it would be a great resource for my teaching back in Australia. Suspecting that he had inflated the price I went to the shop adjacent and proceeded to compare costs. I was no sooner in there, when I was accosted by the short Arab owner next door. He came at me like a madman and proceeded to lay into me with a series of punches to my mid-regions. "Hey, what's going on?", I thought. He then grabbed hold of my shirt, tearing it open and caused my buttons to be ripped off. I was then hurled across the shop into a cabinet of vases which shattered onto the floor. By this stage I was more than a little concerned that he would pick up one of the broken pieces and shove it into my face. So when he came at me again, I put him in a restraining headlock. He then accused me in broken English of stealing his slides. I must say I was looking a little rough with a beard and cheap clothes, but I was no thief. I emptied out my pockets and my bag. "I haven't got your slides" I desperately pleaded. The owner still had his jaw open as he surveyed the mess on the floor and the short Arab storekeeper from next door eventually calmed down. I then fell to my knees and cried uncontrollably heaving and sobbing from my heart. I had come from halfway across the world only to be beaten up for nothing. The shopkeepers looked at each other and realized that I was innocent, so they offered me a small cup of black tea. It must have taken me at least fifteen minutes to recover and finally I was able to make my way outside. I was pretty dishevelled, and suddenly the Via Dolorosa made sense. Jesus was beaten up and crucified for doing absolutely nothing except promoting love and peace.