

Appendix D

LENA DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

by Gila Svirsky
July 10, 1998

Yesterday was a day I won't ever forget. Neither will Salim and Arabiyeh Shawamreh or their six children. We had planned a joint Israeli-Palestinian protest against home demolitions. The idea was to set up a tent on the site of a demolition, a tent that would serve several purposes: protest, solidarity, documentation, and compassionate listening to the family members. We planned to move this tent from site to site, wherever the Israeli army used its bulldozers. Yesterday's inauguration of the tent was planned for opposite the so-called "civil administration" headquarters -- the nerve center of Israel's control of the occupied territories -- those who actually do the dirty work of demolishing people's homes and other acts of oppression.

Our bus from Jerusalem held activists from several peace movements -- Bat Shalom, Rabbis for Human Rights, Gush Shalom, and Peace Now. We are all partners in a coalition called the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions, and our demonstration was to be held jointly with the Palestinian Land Defense General Committee.

Through the bus microphone, I listened to Meir Margalit explain the action and sketch one chilling scenario. "If the soldiers try to prevent us from holding the demonstration, proceed in an orderly manner to the planned alternative site. There must not be violence on our side, but if the army engages in violence, do not separate from the Palestinians. The army will be more brutal to the Palestinians if the soldiers manage to separate us."

It was a sobering thought as we drove across the Green Line and toward the protest tent. Suddenly a call came across a mobile phone and Meir took the mike again. "We have just had word that a demolition is taking place at this very moment not far from here." It's a rare occurrence to catch a demolition in progress, no less with a group of peace activists; most demolitions take place with virtually no warning, and hence no time to protest.

With no further discussion, we turned toward Anata on the edge of Jerusalem, a town composed almost entirely of Palestinian refugees who had lived in the Old City of Jerusalem and fled in 1967. They thought they had found refuge in Anata.

After driving the narrow unpaved streets of Anata for what seemed an interminable time, we finally located the area and the bus parked as close as possible. We still had to walk 10 minutes down narrow, zig-zagging dirt roads between crowded homes until we came to the outskirts of Anata. There we practically ran toward the

edge of the hill and looked below -- a beautiful home set into the pastoral valley with one of its walls now crumpled into rubble by a roaring bulldozer; a family and neighbors sobbing nearby; and a unit of Israeli soldiers preventing anyone else from approaching the scene.

The scene was horrific. We surged down the hill in our small group until the soldiers blocked our progress with their guns and bodies. There were scuffles trying to get past them, but more soldiers joined the barricade.

M.K. Naomi Chazan who was with us demanded to see the order proclaiming this a "closed military zone", as the soldiers claimed, and after several long minutes the officer complied. Who knows if the order was genuine or invented at the last minute. But the guns were real.

So there we stood on the side of the hill and watched with an unbearable sense of helplessness as the "civil" administration's bulldozer took the house apart wall by wall. He drove through the front garden with a profusion of flowers and a lemon tree and slammed the front door as if he were God Almighty. Backing away, he slammed again until the entire front was shattered and dangling from metal rods. Then he came from every side, slamming and crashing his shovel against the walls. Finally he lifted off the roof, barely suspended, and sent it crashing below. When that was done, he went around the back of the house and crashed through all the fruit trees, including a small olive stand. He saw a water tank on a platform and knocked that over, the tank tumbling down and a cascade of water drenching the trees now uprooted and broken. He saw two more tanks nearby and knocked those over as well. I have never seen anyone in the Middle East deliberately waste so much water. Then he noticed a shack in the corner of the yard and he churned over to that, his cleated treads grinding and squealing over the rubble he had to climb over. The shack was an easy swipe for his shovel, and we were surprised to see two doves fly out, one white and one black, frightened out of their wits. They flapped their wings briefly and landed not far from their former home.

All the while, a crowd of Palestinian neighbors and young men were gathering behind us on the mountain crest, cat-calling and jeering. From our Israeli group, many engaged the soldiers in challenges: "How can you sleep at night?"; "Is this what is meant by defending Israel?"; "Don't you understand the immorality of this action?", and the like. Every single soldier, from the high commander to the lowest GI responded the same way: "This is legal; we're only following orders." One woman tried to yell at the bulldozer driver every time there was a lull in the din. But nothing we could think to say stopped the roar of devastation. By then I had managed to move down past the soldiers and was with the family outside their former home. One woman was sobbing and I put my arms around her. When I began to cry too, she put her arms around me. A weeping girl joined us and we both encircled her with our arms. I later learned that this was 14-year-old Lena and this house had once been hers.

Then suddenly, gunshots rang out. Some of the young Palestinian men had begun throwing stones -- from a very great distance, I note -- and Israeli soldiers retaliated by opening fire and running up the hill after them.

The soldiers were shooting as they ran, setting off their guns like the wild west. I saw the commander and told him that this was illegal, a clear violation of the "open fire regulations" of the Israeli army, which stipulate that a soldier's life be in danger before he opens fire. I demanded repeatedly that he tell the soldiers to stop. The commander shrugged and didn't bother answering. After 10 minutes or so, the shooting stopped.

Amazingly, no "stray" bullets had hit any of our group, although the Palestinians, as usual, were not as lucky. A man approached the crowd of neighbors, said a few words, and instantly two women let out piercing shrieks and tore up the hill, running at top speed. The son of one of them had been hit by a bullet. I don't know his condition. Already in the hospital was Arabiyeh, the mother of the family, who had been violently struck by soldiers when she tried to prevent them from destroying her home.

By then there was nothing to do but sift through the rubble. I picked through the rocks and talked to Jeff Halper, who is organizing the program to "adopt" Palestinian families whose homes are slated for demolition.

Jeff had sat in the living room of this home last week, now a pile of jagged concrete slabs, hearing Salim and Arabiyeh talk about the problem of Palestinians not being issued construction permits. "Just last night," Salim had told Jeff during the demolition, "friends and family had sat in this home watching the World Cup soccer game". Now there are 6 children without tv, toys, books, diapers, bottles, or a place to lay their heads. Instead, they remain with the trauma of the Israeli bulldozer turning their home and security into a bottomless pit of hatred for this occupation and the people who carry it out.

For the first time, I noticed the scenery around us. On a nearby mountain -- not a distant one, mind you -- were the classrooms and amphitheater of the Mount Scopus campus of Hebrew University. Had they looked out their classroom window, the students studying ethics and justice could have had a clear view of the scene of brute power and the trampling of this family's lives. And surrounding everything, on mountains and hilltops to our left, right, and center, were the bright orange rooftops of the settler homes in the Occupied Territories. The settlers have no problem whatsoever in getting construction permits. And no one would dare uproot their olive trees, waste their water, harm their homes, or turn their children out into the streets. A lot of us picked up olive branches from the yard as we walked back to the buses. Most of the branches, like mine, were crushed by the treads of power run amuck.

Well, it's almost over, this long, sad story, but it must not end here.

Our group, the same people and more I hope, will be going back next Friday to begin rebuilding this home. This is a new tradition of non-violent resistance that began a few weeks ago, and is gaining momentum. The Palestinians rebuild, the Israeli army demolishes, and they rebuild again.

As one of the neighbors said, "We'll see who lasts longer."

Also Some Good News

Don't get this wrong -- we have not won yet. But things are definitely looking up with regard to preventing the demolition of Palestinian homes. This is directly attributable to the relentless pressure on the authorities -- international and Israeli -- by all of us.

We know that senior officials in the US, Canada, & the European Union have appealed to Israel to halt the demolitions. And we know that several key Israeli officials in relevant departments -- Interior Ministry, Internal Security Ministry, and Jerusalem municipality -- have responded in a number of positive ways, though none has yet called for a halt to this policy. It's also a fact that the issue of Palestinian home demolitions has become part of the public discourse about occupation and its evils -- as it had never been before. Most important, demolitions have decreased over the past two years.

Here are the encouraging numbers?

The count of homes destroyed has dropped from a total of 233 homes in 1997 to a total of 147 homes in 1998. So far in 1999, "only" 49 homes have been destroyed. (Figures from B'Tselem as of 30 June 1999.)

This is certainly something to celebrate, but we have not won yet. Every home destroyed means the needless suffering of an entire family. What we are aiming for is to wipe out the policy of destruction, and to institute a policy of granting construction permits to Palestinians. In other words, much work remains to be done.

Many thanks to so many of you for the *thousands* of letters you sent to government officials about the policy of home demolitions, with copies to us. They clearly make a difference. There's still more to do.

And remember what anthropologist Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Thanks for all your good help!
Bat Shalom