In the West Bank: The drama of the drive home

by Marthame and Elizabeth Sanders in the May 16, 2001 issue

The drive from Afula in Israel south to Jalame in the West Bank takes only minutes, but these two towns are worlds apart. Afula is a relatively affluent suburb with ATMs, tree-lined streets and pleasant neighborhoods. Jalame is a town of degrading poverty, which is evident in the potholed roads (when they're paved at all), storefront vegetable stands and shells of buildings—memorials to the wars that never end.

We know this drive well because it takes us through an Israeli checkpoint on our way to Zababdeh, the Palestinian village where we live. Zababdeh is one of a handful of villages in the Holy Land where a majority of the residents are Christian, and it's the only such village in the northern West Bank. We have been teaching English and religion classes in the village's Roman Catholic school.

The Jalame checkpoint's lookout towers, severe walls topped with barbed wire and sandbagged gun turrets let us know we have reached the Green Line, the international armistice line that separates Israel from the West Bank, land that Israel has held under military occupation for the past 34 years. Depending on which soldier is standing guard, we are subject either to a few minutes of questions (Where are you from? Can I see your passport?) or—on the basis of our Israeli license plates—to a simple wave of the hand motioning us through.

Recently, while waiting for visitors to arrive, we spent the better part of an hour talking to an Israeli soldier eager to practice his English. He spoke about his time in Hebron. "I'm not allowed to say this, but the problem there is 100 percent the settlers," he told us. "They even hate us soldiers who are there to protect them." He has spend the past couple of months at Jalame's checkpoint—a particularly fiery time to be assigned there. While we talked to him, two Israeli police vans pulled up and deposited their cargo of Palestinians who had been caught illegally entering Israel to work. They blinked as the van doors opened. In their hands were papers

telling them about the fine they had just incurred.

This checkpoint is also the beginning of the road settlers take to two nearby settlements, Kadim and Ganim. Housing about 80 people between them, these settlements are hardly the home of religious ideologues or rogue gunmen—or so our soldier friend told us. Rather, the settlers came seeking a standard of living that is out of their reach in places like Haifa, Upper Nazareth or even Afula. They drive from Kadim or Ganim to jobs in northern Israel. They are suburban commuters who just happen to live in illegal housing—housing outlawed by UN Security Council resolutions

Once we are through the checkpoint, we put a *kaffiye* (Palestinian checkered headscarf) on the dashboard—a signal to the Palestinians that we are not settlers, despite our license plate and Western appearance. In Jalame discount shops haphazardly line the street. Their bilingual signs (Arabic and Hebrew) attest to the thriving business they once did, when Israelis used to cross the border to take advantage of low prices. Now, in the midst of the current *intifada*, the shops are deserted.

We reach the turnoff for the settlers' road, which bypasses the Palestinian city of Jenin. Huge warning signs in Hebrew mark the way, as does an Israeli military jeep and a large, metal arm which blocks the road into Jenin. Without our Israeli license plates, we would be unable to take the settlers' road.

We drive past plastic greenhouses full of tomatoes, cucumbers and other produce. From here to Zababdeh, all roads connecting to or crossing the bypass road have been closed. When the *intifada* resumed last September, the Israeli military blocked them with large chunks of concrete and high piles of dirt. This effectively cut surrounding villages off from Jenin, the main city in the northern West Bank. A network of side-side roads then sprang up—cutting through fields—to enable people to work, shop and go to school in Jenin. More than once we have taken taxis to Jenin that carefully negotiated a dirt road through what would soon be a wheat field. In December, the Israelis dug up this impromptu road and all others like it and dug trenches alongside the bypass road, preventing cars from entering it from any side roads. Occasionally, roads are "liberated" by a Palestinian bulldozer, but the Israelis are quick to block them again.

We often see lines of taxis at these road blocks. One brings people from a village to the big pile of dirt. People climb over it, cross the bypass road, and climb over another heap of concrete and soil to another taxi which will take them into Jenin. At the busiest of these crossing points is an Israeli tank. Palestinian children run to and from school under the eye—and gunsights—of Israeli soldiers. When the children see our yellow-plated car, they don't bother to look at the *kaffiye*. Instead, they scamper away, afraid of what might happen if they linger too long. They have learned a lot about the dangers of life by living under the shadow of an M-16.

Every now and then, some brave (or perhaps desperate) souls will try to drive through even the smallest opening. Sometimes they make it, sometimes they get stuck and everyone gets out to push, sometimes they leave their stuck cars to go to fetch a tractor. During winter's rainy season, all the roads turn to mud and the taxi business dries up.

We head up the hill that leads to the two settlements. Settlements are often on hills, for they provide the best location for military outposts. Early in the restart of the *intifada*, soldiers evacuated Kadim and turned it into a military base. One of the Palestinian "martyrs" was killed by a shot from there. Once you have seen one settlement, there is no mistaking another. Row after row of red-roofed houses stand on the crest of a hill like soldiers standing watch over the villages nearby. None of these houses has water tanks on the roof the way Palestinian houses do. We are told that the settlements always have water and electricity, unlike the Palestinian villages whose stolen land is home for the "lifestyle" settlers. In the past few months, construction crews have been at work on the bypass road, improving it and adding electrical lighting alongside it. The people doing the work are often Palestinians, needing to work in this brave, new world, even if their work contributes to their own oppression.

Once we pass the turn-off to Ganim, the road suddenly narrows and the pavement doesn't look so new anymore. A sign points the way to the new Arab-American University of Jenin, which had the misfortune of opening on the day that Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount. Despite the conflict and disruption, it has remained open all year, though some of the teachers who were slated to come changed their minds after watching the news.

Eventually we reach the top of the hill above Zababdeh. The first thing you see is the new Latin Patriarchate School, inaugurated two years ago with significant help from

a private agency in Spain. The other thing that attracts your attention is the muezzin—the Muslim prayer tower.

According to tradition, which is supported by some archaeological evidence, Zababdeh was on an old Roman road that made its way from Nazareth down to Jerusalem. Supposedly Mary and Elizabeth stopped here on their journey (some have conjectured that the village's name comes from a transformation of the name "Elizabeth"). Today the village has three churches—Anglican, Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic—among which about two-thirds of the village's 3,000 people are divided. There are also Greek Catholics, but their church has been closed since 1985, a casualty of political and economic wranglings in the church hierarchy.

The reason the road is open from the checkpoint to Zababdeh is because Bezek, an Israeli military training camp, is stationed at the edge of the village. It was once a Jordanian camp, built on confiscated land. The Israelis claimed it after 1967, and expanded onto more confiscated land. The road winds down through the camp's shooting range, past an old Patton tank (used by Iraqis in 1948) and other recognizable targets, such as metal figures cut in the shape of 1920s-era soldiers.

When we first arrived, the road would be closed at times for military training exercises. Now there is no need for training. Almost every other night there is a gunfire exchange. Palestinian youth go into the hills surrounding the camp and shoot down into it, and the Israelis return fire. Fortunately, casualties have been few. Early in the fighting, an Israeli tank shell went through a family's window and passed through two walls before stopping in the bathroom. The family had hid in the back of the house when the gunfire began. Since then, homes that border the camp have been evacuated at times for safety reasons.

Once when we were shopping, red tracer bullets were fired from the camp over the village. The next night, while we were admiring the eclipse of the moon, several more tracers fired from the camp went overhead, again toward a nonexistent aggressor. We were frightened and confused, since no shooting had come from our direction.

Arriving in Zababdeh, we are greeted by the Palestinian checkpoint that denotes "Area A," which is under "full" Palestinian Authority control. Its white sandbags, hand-dug trenches and metal lean-tos make a striking contrast to the Israeli camp. When the shooting breaks out, the soldiers leave their checkpoint to patrol the

streets of Zababdeh and to make sure that no one is shooting from residential areas.

While Zababdeh has averted the huge disasters that have befallen many Palestinian areas during the past seven months, it has not been immune to the occupation's crushing blows. Many professionals (such as nurses and bankers) who once worked in Israel have had their travel permission revoked. Those who work for the Palestinian Authority have worked for months with only the promise of a salary. Families looked forward to the Lenten fast so they could have a theological reason for their meager rations.

Many times we have been subject to intensive inquiries about our government's role in the crisis here. Why, we are asked, does the U.S. blame the Palestinians for what is happening, abstain from or veto UN resolutions, and welcome Ariel Sharon with open arms? Often the only thing we can do is simply to listen and absorb people's anger.