

## INTRODUCTION

I am a Human Rights Worker and Freelance International Trainer. In May 2005 I was invited by a representative of the Qattan Centre for the Child, Gaza to facilitate a training course on Project Management and Youth Participation for staff of the Centre, The British Council and other youth organisations from across the Gaza Strip. I travelled out to Gaza on the 20<sup>th</sup> June and returned to Scotland on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July. I am grateful to the Qattan Centre for the Child and the British Council for making the necessary travel and accommodation costs available to make my visit possible.

Before leaving I made a promise to those I met and those I worked with that I would write of my journey to, and my time in, Gaza to, as Heyam a member of staff at the Qattan Centre for the Child put it, "*tell the story for the children and young people of Palestine*". My story is in three parts: my travels to, my time in and my journey back from Gaza. This, the first part, is for Karima a young Bedouin woman from the Refugee Camp of Nuseirat, who asked me "*To tell the world about the crossings*".

## GETTING TO GAZA

Following a sleepless overnight flight from Aberdeen I arrive at Tel Aviv Airport at 5.00am exhausted and filled with trepidation about the final leg of my journey into Gaza. Past tales of interrogations, strip searches, long delays and refused entries flood my mind. The tales are quickly substantiated; we are only a few yards along the disembarkation corridor and already security is stopping people: "*What is the purpose of your visit to Israel?*" "*Where will you be staying during your visit?*" I keep my head down and head for "Baggage" and Passport Control. I pick up my bags then after a short wait at Passport Control where I am given a stamp on both my passport and landing card and a curt nod from the female on duty I head for the exit. Waiting for me is Abu my driver and "unofficial tour guide" who will drive me the 50 or so klms down the coast to the "Areas" at Erez Crossing – one of the Israeli control points into Gaza.

The journey passes quickly. Abu points out various "places of interest": The town of Rishon LeZion literally meaning "First to Zion", the new hillside villas currently under construction to accommodate the settlers who will shortly be removed from Gaza, the towns of Ashdod and Mordechai. We discuss the quality of the road network, the rich, lush landscape of olive and orange groves and the apparent wealth of the area evidenced by the villas scattered across the hillsides. Discussion turns to life in Gaza. Abu tells me of the many problems that the citizens face. "*There are very big problems in Gaza. You are going to help but you will find it difficult to know where to start*".

We reach the "Areas" just before 6.30am, a hot sandy outpost, home to a few Portacabins, a few Palestinian workers and their vehicles waiting for clearance and not much more. Over the road sits the checkpoint, a tollbooth and barrier beyond which lies the "VIP Lounge" where I, and others, get (or don't get) clearance into Gaza. But first the checkpoint; we approach, Abu helps me with my luggage, we wait for the two adolescent soldiers, one male one female, on duty to acknowledge our presence, so engrossed are they in their discussions that this takes about five minutes. As they turn their attention to us Abu shakes my hand, wishes me well and heads back to the car.



Erez Checkpoint: Source: <http://www.miftah.org> May 2005

The female soldier approaches me. I hand her my passport. She returns to the tollbooth where she and her male counterpart engage in further discussion, make a telephone call, look at my passport and landing card, look at me, engage in further discussion, share a joke, then silence. A few minutes later they both approach me. The female hands me back my passport “*Why do you want to go in THERE?*” she asks. I consider the tone of her question and her aggressive body language and decide it might make clearance quicker and easier if I mention only one of my host organisations “*I am an international trainer I have been invited by the British Council to facilitate a training course on their behalf*”. I reply. “*The “VIP Lounge” is closed you cannot come through*” she tells me. “*When will it be open?*” I ask. “*Maybe at 8 am*” the male soldier speaks for the first time. “*Go away*” he adds. “*Go away where? Where can I wait?*” I ask him. “*Over there in the sand*” he replies pointing into the distance. I look over to some concrete bollards and a Portacabin that has seen better days. “*Do you mean there?*” I ask them. “*THERE, over there with the “Arabics” go and stand over there with them and we will call you when we are ready.*” shouts the female as she points to the Palestinian workers.

As I make my way over Abu appears with his car, he drives many people to the “Areas” so he has waited to make sure I am not abandoned to the elements. I am glad to see him. “*You can rest in the car until they call you*”. While Abu goes over to chat with the others who are waiting I try to phone my contacts in Gaza to tell them of the delay. I have a strong signal on my phone but cannot get a connection to any of the numbers in Gaza. I decide to try texting the UK the message goes straight through. It is only 5.00am at home but my daughter replies immediately. I ask her to go online and send a message to my contacts through “*Yahoo*” explaining the situation. At 7.30am the soldiers wave me over to the checkpoint. The female tells me “*You can go to the VIP Lounge now, over there.*” as she points to the clearance buildings. I thank her and smile she does not smile back.

I enter the air-conditioned building, a welcome escape from the heat and dust outside. The counters are staffed by yet more adolescents who chat amongst themselves and look anywhere but at me. I decide not to play the game so rather than try to attract their attention I turn my attention to the soldiers who are lounging outside drinking coke, smoking cigarettes, taking calls on their mobile phones. Perhaps because they appear to be of a similar age to my own daughter, it is the young women who attract my attention, made up and manicured, mobile phone in one hand, gun in the other.

Finally, one of the young women calls me over. I hand over my passport. “*What is the purpose of your visit?*” “*Where will you stay?*” “*What is your occupation?*” “*Who has invited you, who has arranged your visit?*” I answer all her questions. “*You do not have clearance, why did you not check before you came here that you had clearance?*” I tell her that I had and that as far as I was aware the British Council had indeed arranged clearance for me a few days ago. She repeats her now familiar mantra “*You do not have clearance*”. I ask, “*What happens now?*” “*Take a seat, this could take a few hours.*” she replies. I take a seat.

I phone my daughter, she has made contact with my host organisation. They tell me not to worry; the driver in Gaza will wait for me. If I am refused entry I should contact them again and they will ask the British Council HQ in Jerusalem to contact the Israeli Authorities. As I end my call a young male soldier approaches me. “*Do you have any other form of identification?*” “*Do you have anything that proves your occupation?*” “*What about visit (business) cards, do you have any?*” he asks. “*No, I do not have any visit cards, but I have a copy of a publication I worked on for the European Commission it contains my biography and photograph, it is in my suitcase, will that do?*” “*Yes let me see it*”. I hand him the book open at the relevant page he looks at the page, looks at me, and looks back at the page. “*So you are a Human Rights activist employed by the European Commission, you work for the European Commission?*” No” I reply “*I am a freelance international trainer I work on contract to many organisations the European Commission is only one of them*”. “*Wait here for a moment*” he tells me as he heads back behind the counter. The door to a small office opens and an older man appears (the first person over 25 I have seen) he looks at me, I look at him, he says nothing then goes back into his office closing the door behind him.

I decide to freshen up; I follow the signs to the toilets. The female toilets are locked. I return to the counter to ask for the key, I fail to make eye contact with any of them so I ask one of the two male cleaners if they can get me a key. No key is forthcoming so they suggest that I use the male toilets and they will stand guard to make sure that no one else comes in. I have little choice, it is four hours since I left Tel Aviv and who knows how much longer I will have to wait for clearance. As I am washing my hands I hear one of the soldiers calling the cleaners back to the main area, the cleaner calls to me, shrugs his shoulders raises his hands in submission, I nod and tell him “*It’s OK*”. I finish up and return to the waiting area, I don’t look at the soldiers but I know they are laughing.

A few minutes later the young male soldier returns. “*Lynne, would you like a cup of coffee?*” I am so taken aback by the change in tone that it takes me a minute to answer. “*Yes thank you*” I reply. The young woman closely follows him. “*Lynne, we are working on your clearance, it may take two or three hours would you like to visit the town of Mordechai while you are waiting?*” I consider my recent wait at the checkpoint and tell her “*No thanks I will just wait here*”.

Just before 10am I am called to the counter. “*Lynne, you can go*”. The young woman hands me my passport and points me in the direction of Gaza. I pass into a concrete tunnel and through a series of electronically controlled gates that seem to take an age to open. The final gate slowly closes as I approach. I try to reach it before it shuts but a faceless voice shouts, “*WAIT*”. The gate swings open a few minutes later and I cross into “no mans land” where I met by a smiling young Palestinian with a ramshackle trolley. “*Welcome to Gaza*” he says as he lifts my luggage onto the trolley and we walk the final kilometre together.



“No-Mans Land” Concrete Tunnel to Gaza: Source: <http://www.miftah.org> May 2005

As we emerge into the light he waits for me as the Palestinian soldiers check my passport against a list. “*Welcome to Gaza*” they say as they wave me through.

The border is a barren place, a wooden shed selling cigarettes, a few stalls selling fruit, a line of taxis, not much else. As promised Sahid, my driver, is waiting for me. “*Welcome to Gaza, you have had a long journey. Are you English, have you travelled from London?*” he asks. “*I am Scottish, I have travelled overnight from Aberdeen*” I tell him. “*Ahh, Scottish, Braveheart, I have seen the film, Welcome, Welcome*” he replies. “*I will take you to the Centre where you will meet your hosts then you will go to your apartment to rest*”. I thank him for waiting for me. He laughs: “*Four hours is nothing*” he tells me. “*It is common for Palestinians to wait three days for clearance at the “Areas” the old, the young, the sick, people recovering from operations we all have to wait, we are used to waiting*”.

We take the winding sandy road towards Gaza city. I am greeted by street upon narrow street of breeze block and crumbling concrete buildings, mountains of rubbish rotting in the humid, oppressive heat, armed police or militia on every street corner, portraits of the martyred, children and young people everywhere.



**Jabalia Refugee Camp** Source: L. Tammi, July 2005

I am minded of the famous quote from Dante's Inferno as a fitting farewell from the gates of Erez:

***"Through me you pass into the city of woe. Through me you pass into eternal pain. Through me among the people lost for aye. All hope abandon ye who enter here".***

For what lay before me was a man (*sic*) made absolute hell on earth, created by one nation to contain and control another nation, and its name was Gaza.