

Informal trip report, Palestine, Spring 2023

Haynes Miller

I spent April 23 to May 3, 2023, in Palestine. Below are lightly edited email messages to my family, with a rough record of the trip. This was not a “fact-finding” trip and I didn’t make great efforts to document everything. The point was to visit as many Palestinian universities as possible, meet the faculty and students I have been working with over the last couple of years, and participate in an education workshop at Birzeit University.

Sat April 22 – Sun April 23

The Delta nonstop flight from Boston to Tel-Aviv was half empty, and there were no questions at border control. Franz Ulm picked me up at the airport – thank you Franz! – and drove back to Birzeit. I was staying with Franz and Leila Farsakh in the amazing house built by her father. Here’s the view from the terrace off my bedroom – this is the BZU campus.



Monday April 24

Today we drove to Jerusalem, walked around the old city - Via Dolorosa, the souk,



and then went for a late lunch at the American Colony Hotel, with a close friend of Leila and Franz's, Susan Jacobi, visiting from Boston and now staying here at the Chateau, and her friend Rita. Don't miss the bookstore there!



We exited by Damascus Gate (which I think is where we picked up our guide Mike in 1987).



Tuesday April 25

Franz drove with Susan and me from Birzeit to Bethlehem with a flash visit to [Mar Saba](#), one of the oldest continuously inhabited monasteries in the world, founded in 483.



We then drove on to the Bethlehem traffic jam, arriving just barely in time for the talk Mazin Qumsiyeh invited me to give at Bethlehem University. Here's a screenshot from a zoom conference led by Jessie Qumsiyeh a week later --

Museum Visitors



Prof. Haynes
Miller

24/04/23: We at PIBS and Bethlehem University had the honour of hosting distinguished MIT professor Haynes Miller. Prof Miller delivered a captivating lecture on topology (flexible geometry) and toured the grounds of the museum.



Susan and Franz toured the beautiful Bethlehem University campus and then drove back to Birzeit. After the lecture Mazin took me through the city to the Church of the Nativity.



Mazin contemplating Hieronymus in the basement of the Church of the Nativity.



He gave me a tour of the [Palestine Museum of Natural History](#). Mazin and Jessie then took me to an excellent restaurant in Bethlehem. Mazin absented himself early to participate in a Rotary Club meeting – he is the incoming president of the Bethlehem chapter. (The Rotary Club has supported important parts of his museum.) I was honored to stay overnight in their apartment. Thank you Mazin and Jessie!

Wed Apr 26

Well, another amazing day in Palestine. Vivien Sansour had arranged for Hassan Muamer to give me a tour of Battir and the Seed Museum. I'd made friends with Mazin Qumsiyeh's volunteers - college age kids from Germany, Ireland, UK - and when Hassan appeared in a van all four came along. Battir is a community just south of Jerusalem that has managed to protect itself against being broken up by the Wall, and Hassan is the guy who led this amazing successful piece of resistance. He's created a whole culture of protecting the traditional agriculture and made a kind of ecotourism spot there.



The [Archnet site](#) contains many photos of the reconstruction, and [here](#) is a report by Hubert Murray about this project.

Here is the seed museum!



Hassan drove us back to Mazin's museum, and I walked from there to the service depot, passing this Banksy artwork.



I filled the last seat (meaning that it left instantly) for Ramallah, and then was guided by a helpful young woman named Majd to another one to Birzeit University, where I met up with Franz.



In the evening we spent an hour with PA Minister of Education Marwan Awartani (who had entertained us back in 1987!), in his house. He regaled us with his struggles with the recently ended [teachers' strike](#).

Thu Apr 27

Leila's cousin Said drove us - Leila's aunt, their friend Susan, Franz, and me - to Nablus. The road passes through [Huwara](#), which was as expected filled with green uniformed IDF folks toting machine guns or aiming them directly at us as we drove through. We stopped by Said's sister's house (with an amazing front room featuring beautiful calligraphic wall art), had a coffee in her garden (attended to by her charming Down's daughter). An-Najah physicist Ahmed Bassalat then appeared, and led us on a rapid tour through the old souk, stopping twice for the amazing characteristic Nablus sweets and for this photo in front of the Clocktower.



Then we drove around An-Najah campus - beautiful modern stone campus - and arrived, again, at the very last minute for my talk.



I met my faculty collaborators Khalid Adarbeh and Muath Karaki in person --



-- and their student Abed Urdnia. Lots of faculty -- including Physics Department chairperson Hadil Abualrob -- and students at this one.



Then a festive lunch with faculty and administrators featuring a chicken and eggplant maqluba. Quite a few useful contacts. Here is Majdi Dwikat, Vice President's Assistant for Medical and Health Sciences, pointing at Raed Alkowni, Dean of the Faculty of Science



Heading back to Birzeit, we discovered that Huwara was closed. So Said found his way through various dirt roads and back streets and avoided the town. Eventually we made a tour of this amazing planned but almost empty city of [Rawabi](#).



Fri Apr 28

Franz led Susan and me on an energetic three hour walk near Ein Yabrud in the hills east of Birzeit.





Soon we were joined by a Mohammad, who accompanied us (at the instruction of his father, as it turned out) to a Crusader castle on a hilltop and then back to his uncle's work shed --



Back for lunch, nap, prep for tomorrow, then dinner party with a few people who will participate tomorrow, including Bishara Doumani, the (soon to be ex) president of Birzeit University, Bassem Nasir (son of its founding president and UNICEF Education Specialist) and his wife Irene Velez, Birzeit CS professor Mustapha Jarrar, Samia Al-Boutmeh (Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Business and Economics at Birzeit), and others.

Sat Apr 29

Mainly the workshop at Birzeit today. I think it went OK. About 40 out of 100 registered participants were there. People coming from Bethlehem were delayed because of checkpoint slowdowns at the "Container Checkpoint" near Huwara. Business as usual. Here are Franz Ulm and Reema Sbeih, the two principal organizers of the workshop.



I moderated two successive panels - one with faculty, and the one with students, including the two students I have been working with for a couple of years: Nasief Khlaif and Ali Tahboub. In fact lots of people I've been working with on that project were there - including Ahmed Bassalat (who works on exactly the same CERN project as Eric!) and the one and only Ubai Aboudi.



The Chateau is hosting tonight Susan and three other women who have been coming to Palestine regularly for a while, working with the Lajee school in Aida refugee camp.

Sun Apr 30

Strenuous walk with Franz in the hill behind the house here in Birzeit, then lunch Ubai and the four women involved with Lajee Camp kindergarten. Then Leila drove with the teachers and Ubai with Franz, Frida, and me through Jalazone Camp outside Ramallah and on across the Valley of Fire to Aida Camp in Bethlehem. A section of the drive went through Area A, demarked by this friendly warning sign.



Here I am with Franz and Ubai in front of the entrance to Aida Camp. The UN headquarters is behind us; the Lajee school in front of us.



This is an amazing non-UN funded project; see Hubert Murray's [report](#). He proudly led us through the renovation and expansion of this school.





Frida checking out the playground ...





Here's the hydroponic roof garden.



A view from the roof --



At the huge dinner following, at the Khutar Restaurant, I sat with Hubert Murray, who as it turns out was the lead engineer for the Big Dig and has been a leading Palestinian rights activist for many years. Down the table is [Haidar Abdel-Shafi](#), and in front is Mohammed Alazza, director of the Lajee Center.



Mon May 19

Energetic walk this morning near Birzeit.





On the way to dinner with Ubai we stopped at Stars and Bucks for mugs.



Spectacular dinner with Ubai, met Hind Shraydeh and their kids Khaled, Basil, Hassan.



Tuesday May 2

Last night Kader Adnan died in Israeli administrative detention on the 87th day of his hunger strike - first such case since 1992. Everything shut down, so no talk at Birzeit today. In fact we basically didn't leave the house. (My bedroom is the near corner in this photo.)



Herbert Murray texted Franz this morning to say that he has COVID. So before dinner tonight I took a test myself ... that came back positive. Huh! So far nothing but maybe mild chills (but the weather is cool and the house is cooler). I plan to get on the plane in any case unless the symptoms get much worse. But it's probably just as well that my Birzeit talk was canceled (once again!).

Wednesday May 3

Franz drove me back to the Tel-Aviv airport this morning, with lots of time to spare. We removed our masks whenever we passed a checkpoint. The plane was almost empty, so I am hopeful that I didn't spread the disease. I went straight to third floor quarantine for a week when I go home. A couple of days felt like a flu and a cold at the same time. But the food Juli left at the door made it tolerable.

