Beit Ummar: Heart of Darkness

By Stephen Williams

The title of Joseph Conrad’s novel “Heart of Darkness” refers both to a geographical entity- colonial Congo in the 19th Century- and to a spiritual and moral wilderness in which the human soul is debased by hatred and greed.

And last week I was there; in Beit Ummar. But it wasn’t Beit Ummar itself that was the Heart of Darkness- on the contrary, there I found kindness, compassion and resilience -“samud”- amongst the community. The darkness was outside, in the settlements that surround it, and among the settlers themselves whose behaviour impinges on every aspect of the lives of Beit Ummar’s citizens. Economic growth, education, family relationships, all suffer at the hands of a group of invaders who think themselves above the law; as indeed they usually are.

I’ve travelled to Hebron on a number of occasions over the past decade but this time, Abdulllla wanted me to drive another route from Bethlehem. It took as past a succession of settlements that, clearly, before long will amalgamate and become a continuous conurbation. And then, pressing up against the town of Beit Ummar itself were Migdal Oz to the east, Karmei Zur to the south, Efrat, Kfar Etzion to the north. Each one occupies Palestinian land. Each one is intent on further expansion as the indigenous community is hemmed-into its ever-shrinking reservation.

There are times when the visitor to Palestine is battered by the litany of daily injustices, casual cruelties and acts of petty spitefulness which dominate the lives of an occupied people. As I sat with the Mayor, Nasri Sabarna, and his team, I learnt how their lives were ordered by the whims of settlers and of how even the youngest were subjected to their hatred.
The day before, the Mayor had managed to extract a boy from the clutches of the IDF who had hauled him off to one of the settlements at the behest of its inhabitants. A word to a soldier is enough; that child did something, said something or looked at him inappropriately.

“Would you like to see a photo?” the Mayor said. I nodded. And there he was; a frightened child of eight, snatched from family and friends by heavily-armed soldiers, acting at the behest of settlers. Eight years old. I marvel at the lack of embarrassment on the part of these callow youths of the IDF whose role, it seems, is to jump at the command of any settler, however crazed, malicious or mendacious. Shame? Embarrassment? Evidently not; the next day a child of a similar age was subjected to the same treatment nearby in Hebron. The scene was captured by ISM volunteers on camera.

It is no surprise that, as the Mayor reported, Beit Ummar has a higher percentage of child detainees than anywhere else in Palestine. The settlers have seen to that.

I asked Nasri Sabarna about the work of Defence for Children and the support it gives to victims and families. Lawyers and case workers provide an essential service both for child and parents. One of them, Abu Hashem Maria, was killed by the IDF at a demonstration in Beit Ummar on 25 July. Three bullets struck him in the torso; this was no accidental death. His work had been in nearby Hebron, monitoring children’s rights violations. Such activities are a threat to Israel’s security. He left a wife and three children.

Perhaps the same charge could be laid at the door of the Mayor as he and his team struggle with the daily problems of any community in Occupied Palestine, here exacerbated by the settlements as they encroach further and further onto Beit Ummar’s land. They resist, they support they find the time to talk to visitors in the hope that their particular Palestinian tragedy is shared with people of goodwill across the world.
Abdulla and I continued our journey to Hebron. Another Heart of Darkness. Here the Occupation is even more visible in the Old City, amongst the abandoned shops, the checkpoints and the wire meshing that protects Palestinians from the rubbish (and worse) hurled at them by settlers.

We enter the Ibrahimi Mosque through turnstiles and then a further checkpoint where a young girl soldier appearing to be no more than fifteen represents the IDF and the Israeli State. Her behaviour towards Palestinians old enough to be her grandparents demonstrates the sheer hatred that the occupiers feel for the occupied. I watched the scene unfold with mounting anger. What sort of parent will that girl be when she is old enough to be a mother? how can those who massacred and destroyed in Gaza be caring, compassionate fathers? One common theme was shared by the Palestinian activists I met; this younger Israeli generation is more hateful, racist and violent than those that preceded it. And more dangerous.

We were prohibited from walking through some of the streets of the city by bored Israeli troops. Their language was consisted of gestures, not words. To our left, the new apartments of settlers loomed over us and to our right, the shuttered, abandoned shops; each one a lifetime’s work for a Palestinian family. Returning to the market, we stop for tea at the shop run by a women’s collective who produce beautiful, traditional embroidery. This, too, is Resistance. And there we are joined by two brave young women from the International Solidarity Movement.

And my last memory of Hebron? As I stand alone, waiting for Abdulla, a boy of about twelve passes me. “You are welcome to Hebron,” he says, perhaps repeating a phrase from a lesson in school. He smiles warmly. As we drive back to Ramallah, my memory is of him and his daily struggle with tear-gas, violence and abuse. The cost he pays for of living in the Heart of Darkness.
A world away, in the Departure Lounge of Tel Aviv Airport, the news I am receiving is all depressing. The Unity Government is showing signs of internal stress; Israel may, yet again, avoid answering for its crimes in Gaza and a new settlement is threatened as collective punishment. Beit Ummar, Hebron and Palestine are as far away from liberation as ever.

The Afro-American poet Langston Hughes, writing seventy years ago of the struggle of his people to win their civil rights asked;

“What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore-
And then run? (continued)
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over-
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?”

– Stephen Williams contributed this article to PalestineChronicle.com.