

Crossing Borders

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Cover photo by Glenda Smith

*To Glenda,
for all the same reasons.*

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Crossing Borders

I LEFT CAIRO ON A small bus and headed out across north *Sina* (*Seena*), or Sinai as it's called in English - toward the border with Israel. I like to see the land go by and I wanted the ride to be part of the whole experience; the *getting-there-is-half-the-fun*. We started before six in the morning, when there was just light enough to see the city in its early morning mode - the only time when there wasn't a throng of people and traffic on the streets. The small cafes were steaming with *awwah* -coffee - and *shai* - tea - and early folks, mostly in *gallabeyas*, the utilitarian robes worn by both men and women, sat at tiny tables, shivering in the new winter light, nibbling on a roll while drinking the hot, strong, sweet potions. Everything was unrealistically peaceful - without the fumes and noise of cars and carts and all the rest, as well as multitudinous pedestrian traffic.

The bus traveled north across the empty streets of Giza, then over the Nile, past Ramses Square and the rail station, which takes awhile in a city the size of Cairo. There was a boiling collection of *felahin* - peasants - around the station, clamoring for a good spot to sell their wares to travelers. Progress was slowed by the congestion; pedestrians wading out between the transports in the

streets, carelessly cutting between the steadily moving vehicles. We passed along the "freeway" that went out toward the airport. It was filling with cars and trucks and carts and the occasional bicycles that are ridden around in the city. By the time we reached the northeastern sector, the day was warming, and everyone had finally come out to join the great, teeming tide that is the ordinary Cairo. We had already been moving for nearly an hour; passing petrol stations where the lines were long, filled with taxis getting ready for the day's travels, and shops that were just opening, setting their wares up in front of the squat little faded lean-to's that lined the streets. Passages were nearly blocked in some places with piles of bent wood tables and chairs, metal utensils, racks of cotton garment, and bolts of cloth. There were stalls of vegetables and of spices, the occasional "supermarket" (tiny places that sell staple items), and breakfast cafes that served substantial *kosheri* and *fuul* and *taamiya* - spicy pasta and bean dishes that are standard morning fare.

There are a great variety of cafes and restaurants in Cairo: everything ranging from street cart snack foods to the finest and best restaurants that can be found in any city of the world. Juice shops abound, their large bins filled with bananas and apples, pomegranates, carrots, avocados, mangos - whatever fruits that are tropical or can be easily imported - awaiting their turns in the pulverizing blenders that line the serving counter. Fried fish is also very popular - I call it "fish under glass" because the fish is fried and then displayed, fully breaded and ready for eating, lining the large glass windowed cases that sit unrefrigerated beside the shop entrance. The same fish seems to wait there all day, but there really is a large enough demand to turn the product frequently. It is wrapped in newspaper, sometimes with chips- *chipsies* as Cairenes call them - and carried away to be consumed. I had some once, while out with friends, and it was delicious, but I wouldn't have bought any on my own.

The noise grew as the day increased; honking vehicles and hawking felahin with their wares piled on carts, shouting children on their way to school, radios pouring out lilting and, to western ears, awkwardly phrased Arabic music, to entertain the passersby as well as the patrons of a cafe or shop.

Dogs slithered in and out among the people; large, frightened, feral creatures who were cowed by the sheer noise and momentum of the human population, driven to go out to seek food for their emaciated bodies. I rarely saw a cat, but am told they are there. They are smaller and capable of scurrying out of sight easily.

We moved on through Cairo on the wide highway, now lined with palm trees, with a scruffy looking midan between the lanes. It was already near mid-morning. We drove out past Heliopolis, a north eastern suburb, and the airport, past the rows of new apartments; tiny boxed-in dwellings that fill so much of the eastern desert in that direction, and finally, at about ten - thirty, we got out to the desert itself and then to the road that led along the Mediterranean toward Gaza.

The day was warm and sunny and fine, just like every other winter day in Egypt. The desert was broken along the sea with stands of rushy grasses and sprangly bush-like plants, and occasional goatherds that munched on the greenery. There were also tents, Bedouin-looking tents of the desert people who lived there all year for the grazing and livelihood of their herds; large tents of woven animal hair and hides, some with striped patterns and others densely colored with natural dyes of red or green or a dull yellow. All of them had an awning that was open across part of one side, with a "room" inside, where tables and pillows would be placed whenever food was served. The awning could be closed, but I wondered if it ever was. It was caked with a fine sand and looked as if it never had been lowered, not even to hide women,

who existed within the bounds of small rooms inside except when they were tending the cooking fires and preparing daily food.

There were a few villages along the route, small and cramped, and one larger place, the city of Al Arish which was rather close to the border town of Rafah, the port of entry into Israel. But before we got to Al Arish we had to cross the Suez Canal and enter, unofficially, into Asia. All the local people acknowledge the Suez as the border between Africa and Asia.

I did not know what to expect when we reached the Canal, but was still surprised when I saw it, narrow and blue, flowing torpidly through the desert. Just before we got to the Suez I saw a large ship apparently sailing through the sand, and knew that the road was converging with the water, but when the Canal appeared and I looked across, it was more like a very small river, much narrower than the Nile, with rusting metal docks on both sides. An equally rusted ferryboat took on the cars - and our bus - that waited on the western side, and spent fifteen minutes loading for the slight journey to the eastern dock.

On the other shore, we were in Asia, just a short hop across the famous waterway. The sand and rock were exactly the same as we had left behind in Africa. Unnatural or man-made lines and boundaries may interfere with lives and cause a lot of chaos, but they are only lines that people have made across papers, or features like the canal, and there seems only a slight reality in them, even if they are guarded or policed in some way. This place was not guarded. There was nothing anywhere but the water flowing sluggishly along, and the stripe of roadway stretching out behind and heading on toward the east. There was no sign in any language to tell us that we had crossed the border into Asia.

The same desert, bordered by the shining sea, and the few bushes and goatherds seemed to be all that lay between Al Arish and Rafah. During that time, in the late 1990's, there was a quieter mood in Gaza, and Rafah still had an accessible border cross-

ing between Egypt and Israel. The bus drove into the entrance area, and we were spilled out to take all our baggage with us into the Egyptian side of the port. The building was not particularly old, but was shabby, full of dust and tables and desks that were covered with paperwork swelling above the top and sometimes dropping over onto the floor. The exit hall had several open pass-through windows with a passport control man working at each one. The man I talked to asked a few perfunctory questions about why I was going to Israel, and rather listlessly stamped the booklet a number of times. I was sent on, into a courtyard where another building stood a short distance from the Egyptian passport control office. On entering that building, I was in Israel.

Things were different in Israel. Immediately. Uniformed officials worked behind open counters, all crisp and clean with no sign of endless paperwork or untidy desks. They spoke English with ease and were efficient, but remote and only vaguely polite.

"Do you want a stamp in your passport or a receipt of entry?" the young woman behind the counter asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I can give you a receipt of entry instead of stamping your passport." She sounded a little impatient.

"Yes, I'll take that," I told her, finally understanding.

She stamped and handed me a separate paper so that no entry from Israel would appear in my passport. Some Middle Eastern Arab governments will not allow anyone with an Israeli passport imprint into their country.

"You have to have that when you leave Israel," she told me simply. "Keep it."

It seemed an easy entry. I left my bags at a counter where they would wait until the bus to Jerusalem arrived and went into the courtyard, a wide, tree lined grassy space that was warm on the January day, with several beds of flowers blooming. The few passengers bound for Jerusalem waited there. We waited. And con-

tinued to wait. The day wore on, but the Egged bus - the Israeli name for their bus company - did not appear. I had left my books with the luggage, so not having anything else to do, I sat on the benches or walked across the green lawn and looked at the nearby hills, lush with some kind of grain, and watched as the sun gradually declined toward the west. I tried to chat a bit with some of the others, but no one talked much at all.

"Are you from Israel?" I asked one man, not knowing exactly what to say to start a conversation. He didn't answer or even look up for a short time, and I wondered if I had asked something offensive.

"I am Palestinian," he finally said. "I live on the West Bank."

"I'm from the U.S.," I told him, "and I'm living in Cairo for awhile"

"Yes, so I thought," he responded, but spoke no more. I had the feeling that he didn't want to talk to me at all.

We were offered tea and some cookies, which we all took readily, and waited still longer. Finally, after nearly four hours, our bus drove into the compound and we loaded onto it, ready to continue. As we were leaving the entry port, I looked back toward the building and noticed, for the first time, a few small windows placed along the top of the walls above the courtyard. I realized, with the quick conviction of one who has suddenly understood, that the waiting was not without purpose. We had been watched. Some person or persons had looked through those small windows and observed our pacing and sitting as the hours went by.

I had been told when I planned the trip that there was no quick entry into Israel; that everybody waited for a few hours at whatever port they entered. I thought that the wait was for inspections, and it was. Apparently the observers in Rafah were satisfied that no one in my group was a danger to the State of Israel, and all of the passengers had been allowed to board the bus and enter the country, but had I acted out my impatience and complained too

much I might have been sent right back up the road that we had come down without ever getting past the gate into the nation of Israel or, eventually, into the Old City of Jerusalem. I would have missed a lot.

The Egged bus turned south along the no-man's zone between Egypt and Israel, established during the war that had taken place thirty years before. The zone had a single-lane road running down it for about two miles, bordered by large rolls of barbed wire and fences. On the right - the Egyptian side - was the desert; unending desert as far as I could see, with stubby trunks of an old orchard standing stark and lifeless in the sand. Egypt had attempted to water the desert and grow crops there, but for some reason had not succeeded.

On the left side of the road, across the barbed wire and the fences, was a large field of grain, the one I had seen from the courtyard, waving in the breeze that came from the Sea. Israel had found a way to water the land and to grow crops of various kinds in that part of the Negev. There were a few small trees at the top of a hill, but all around them the grain waved, lush and green.

At the end of this short ride through the no-man's zone the bus took an abrupt left in front of a wall of rolled barbed wire, passed through an open gate, and headed out across the green and growing Negev on a wide, smooth highway.

As a child in a Sunday School I had learned some things about ancient Israel, their judges and kings, and the cities and the tribes they had ruled there. Some of those bits of knowledge came into abrupt focus during my visit, but none were sharper than the first one. The Egged bus drove along the wide highway for only a few miles before the driver came to an intersection at the edge of the desert. Another smooth road turned off to the right there, and a sign written in Hebrew, Arabic, and English pointed with an arrow down that road and read: "Beersheba - 25 miles." I recalled the ancient tribal places of Israel that I had learned about,

beginning with Dan in the north and ending with Beersheba in the south, and became exultant with the fact that I was actually inside that ancient land, traveling along a new road, finding my place among those who knew what and where Beersheba was, and of the great import it had as the first city - with its well of water - established in that region by the Patriarch Abraham. The fact that Beersheba was a permanent placename in Israel, coming from beyond its very roots, was a wonderful thing to consider. I celebrated those thoughts joyfully inside my own head, but no one could have guessed that from my quiet body language which suggested a tired, almost bored traveler.

We continued on in the afternoon light, coming to an intersection that led to Tel Aviv toward the left, and then drove into a clean and modern petrol station that was also a rest stop for travelers; food and water and a place for respite from the heat. There I had my first long look at a group of Israeli soldiers, although a few had been present at Rafah, standing quietly near the doors and the gates of the port of entry.

Here there were dozens of soldiers, young men and women, all with their guns in tow. The men carried them dangling from a strap on their backs; the women had a long purse-like bag that hung from a shoulder. Although the women's guns were not in evidence all the time, I was sure that they could pull them out and swing into action in a moment, whenever the situation required that kind of response.

These soldiers, however, were at rest. I was told that they were actually hitch-hiking; looking for rides. Some lounged sleepily at tables in an outdoor eating area, or sat on the grass nearby, eating and talking or sleeping. They were quiet and orderly, but not completely alert. A few appeared to be soundly sleeping. Some of the drivers who came into the rest stop talked to the soldiers and offered them rides to various destinations - another way of supporting their military. Hitch-hiking, from what I saw there,

seemed a common style of travel, although I didn't know if it was officially permitted.

Just the week before, a bus carrying military people had been attacked at the main bus station in Jerusalem, and several soldiers had died there. I guessed that there were observers among this group who were watching while the others were able to rest, but that was only a guess.

Israeli soldiers have to wear their uniforms at all times while on active duty, a period of two years for women and three for men at that time, and they have to carry their weapons - just as I saw them displayed - as well. After their years of active duty they were on more or less permanent reserve duty, ready to defend their nation at any moment the need should arise. They were young and vulnerable, and even while they rested there I admired their fortitude in the face of what they had to endure, even though I couldn't agree with all the tangled politics that put them in harm's way.

The passengers from the Egged bus ate well. It had been a long time since we left Cairo, and there had been no stops for a meal until then, although we had waited long at Rafah. The place seemed to me, despite the signs in three languages, much like a clean and convenient truck stop in the Central Valley of California, where I had lived for many years. Not only the rest stop seemed familiar; there were citrus groves along much of the freeway, and oleander bushes grew along the sides and in the median, just as in California. It certainly felt a lot like home, until I looked toward the right, away from the sea, and saw the hills with their lines and piles and formations of stratified stone standing some distance away. The stone seemed almost structural, but it was a natural formation, extending through all the parts of Israel that I saw. The tops of the hills also held new towns and villages, as well as most of the ancient ones. The agricultural lands in the valley were far

too valuable to be wasted on streets and houses and parking lots. Israel is a small country.

Jerusalem appeared slowly, its lights visible in the dusk as the bus ascended the hills. The patterns of rock continued across all those hills, resembling the foundation ruins of a huge city, so widespread that it would have been a gargantuan place in ancient times; but the stones were not ruins. They only looked architectural, lying in almost linear precision along the tops and down the sides of the steep hills.

As we went on, groups of houses and buildings appeared among the rocks, until, at last, on top of it all, stood the city. In the twilight it glimmered softly under the deep blue of the sky and against the blackness of the hills.

When I stepped out into the city the next morning, I noticed the effect - the stone that lay along the hillsides, that had been used in constructing most of the older buildings, was of a honey golden color and in the morning light everything was "Jerusalem, The Golden," in the truest sense of the word.

I stayed at the guest house of the Anglican Cathedral, St. George's, in East Jerusalem, not far up Nablus Road from the Damascus Gate of the Old City, as the walled section is called. The guest house rooms were clean, if not quite comfortable - the beds were hard and the stony floor very cold. A combination of English and Middle Eastern breakfast was included.

I met the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem the first morning at breakfast. He came into the room with three priests and proceeded to make the rounds among all the guests who were there. As he approached me I stood to shake his proffered hand.

"Good morning," he started congenially. "I am Bishop Abu. Welcome to Jerusalem."

"Good morning, Bishop." He was a gregarious man with a wide smile and a strong grip, and I understood that he was dutifully working the room.

"How long will you be with us?" he asked with apparent interest. Then added, "You must be American."

"I am," "*Another tourist here to try find Holiness in this city*" seemed to emanate from his reaction. "I live in Cairo now, though."

He was more interested immediately. "Ah, Cairo. I know the Bishop there well.

Are you Anglican?"

"Yes, Episcopalian. I attend All Saint's there."

"You must give Bishop Gaius my greeting," and he moved away to meet another guest, a man I had just met myself who told me he was from Iran. I heard him telling the Bishop the same thing. It was a couple of days later that he added - only to me - that he was from Iran originally, but that he had been living in Australia for about twelve years.

The cathedral was in the Eastern or Arab section of the city - the area just outside the walled part of Jerusalem, and while it was convenient to visit all the sites in the Old City, it was far from many of the other places I wanted to go. To make things even harder, I soon discovered that taxi drivers from the west side would not readily go into the Arab sector. I could get on a bus, which I used at times, but found that walking was often the best way to get around. I walked a lot during the three weeks I visited Jerusalem, and found my way fairly well most of the time.

The Old City, within the walls, was a confusion of *souks* - bazaars - and shops and religious centers on the lower level, with houses or flats above. Most of the streets were roofed over, and that created the sensation of being in a subterranean place much of the time. There were a great variety of businesses, and more than an adequate supply of churches, synagogues, and mosques. Often streets were pedestrian only, with stairs going down the slopes or climbing to the next level.

I walked up the Via Dolorosa the first day I was there. The nar-

row Way was so filled with pedestrians that the shops and houses were incidental and no one really noticed most of them unless they were looking for trinkets and souvenirs that were also plentiful. People crowded everywhere, even on a January morning. The Way of Sorrow - Via Dolorosa - and the Holy Sepulcher Church are probably the biggest attractions for Christians in the walled City.

After a short walk that took a long time because of the crowds, I saw an empty, wide, iron staircase with peeling green paint that rose from a corner. It seemed to be part of the public street, so I climbed the stair into sunlight on the treetops and birds fluttering around the houses and small gardens. There was no one else in the area. Those gardens, some with trees, were the rooftops of the shops and buildings and the street below. They were on the second-level of the Old City, and as I looked across I saw a large dome standing in the center of a garden, as though it had no structure beneath it. Beside the dome, on the left, there were a couple of rows of huts that resembled long beehives, and a blank wall with a pair of old wooden doors spaced a few feet apart faced the huts across a paved court. Two priests appeared, walking across the court. They approached the first door, opened it, and stepped inside. I looked around, and seeing no one else, walked up to the door and looked in.

I saw a long hallway with Icons and other Christian symbols displayed along the walls. I had come into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher from the roof. Toward the left, down a short stairway, was an open door that led into a chapel where chanting voices were rising. Beyond the door, to the right, I saw the opening of a lengthy staircase that descended into an unknown place. I walked on quietly past the chapel door and looked down.

The stairs followed a long stone wall under a high ceiling that rose toward the center to the height of the dome I had seen outside. The area where I stood seemed dark compared to the sunlit

garden. The priests voices became indistinct and faded as I walked on down the stone stair. There were a few people below, but they were quiet - the whole place seemed muffled; the old stones taking in sound and not allowing it to echo through the building. Incense made the air heavy to breathe and a sense of drowsiness was the dominant impression that lingered amid the dust and smoke.

A few tourists entered through the lofty main doorway, crossed the wide stone floor to the enclosure many people believed to be the vault where Jesus had been buried, and from which he had returned to life, and approached the small, enclosed tomb. Tall candles stood outside the entrance; many tall, somewhat bent or twisted, thick candles. They had once been even taller, probably ten to twelve feet. Now they were stooped and drooped from the heat of the summer that had passed, and were not lit. The candles were lined there in huge ornate holders that stood on the floor, forming a sort of aisle to the door of the Tomb Of Jesus. The tourists came to the door, crossed themselves, and entered one or two at a time - with solemn expressions, some with tears.

I stood waiting, hesitating, and when there was no one else in line, decided to go inside. The tomb was overlain with soft fabric and much rich marble and some gold ornamentation. There were more candles, small ones that were lit, in silver and gold cups. Ancient icons hung on the wall above the shelf where his body would have rested, along with other items I did not recognize. Holy relics. I did not stay long. The space was small, hardly room for more than two people at a time.

For some reason, I felt that it was not right. The tomb was entirely above ground, having been excavated, according to the story, to allow the church to be built around it, and was completely enclosed within the building. I had expected to find a tomb that resembled the one described in the story of the Passion of Jesus, but this was not that tomb. It did not seem to be made of the earth.

Not one natural bit of stone could be seen. Even the entire ceiling was covered with gilt and painted frescoes.

I shook off the feeling of disbelief and walked back through the church. A number of people were climbing up the long staircase. I followed them, not knowing what to expect. Off to the left at the top of the stair, we came to the place called Calvary, still within the church - the place many people accept as the site where Jesus died. There were large contemporary looking cut-out (very tastefully done) images of Jesus on the cross, and of his mother, The Blessed Virgin Mary, and some of Jesus' disciples, behind a glass partition, and there was a place in the floor, beneath a round opening in the glass, where it was believed the cross of Jesus had been placed into the earth. The place was only a hollow in the stone, and seekers could reach through the opening and touch the spot. I didn't want to put my hand inside, mostly because it was under glass and seemed to be in some way "off-limits" to tourists or pilgrims, except for that very small opening in the barrier.

The Church Of The Holy Sepulcher could not be called particularly beautiful. It is one of the oldest of all churches, and the years lie wearily upon it. There have been struggles for supremacy among the religious groups that share the church, and some outright fighting has gone on there even in our time. A Muslim family, by tradition, holds the keys to the church and must open it every day for the Christians to enter. A disputed holy place is an enigma to many people, and seems to be a contradiction to all the teachings of Jesus and the lessons that the early Church tried to learn. It could be that they never did learn them, but only wanted to appear agreeable while suppressing their own feelings and desires, creating a situation of contention and rebellion where "The Peace Of The Lord," the phrase many Christians use to greet each other at church, should rule.

I left the church and the Old City, walking along a different street than the Via Dolorosa where I had entered, one that climbed

and descended on steep stairs, twisting past houses with flower filled courtyards nearly hidden by gates, schools where I could hear the children at play, and ever more churches, until I reached the Damascus Gate and went out onto Nablus Road.

The next morning I was up and out early. I walked down to the Damascus Gate and entered, intent on finding the Western Wall, the center of Judaism in the world. I didn't carry a map - I always like to go wherever the road or my feet lead me - and found a long pedestrian street running diagonally through the Old City and followed it because it seemed to be going into the heart of the place. The covered street was on the lower level, and there was at least one level above, where houses and schools and other activity centers were located; another part of the city's life. The street was a souk - the entire length filled with market stalls - and I walked along feeling as though I had been transported back to an underground Cairo. All the stalls were operated by Arabs and the place was very home-like and interesting. There were old stone arches and vaults above the narrow but very straight street that was sometimes a bit rough and irregular. Some of the stalls were tiny, only openings in the wall, but others were much larger, and some were cafes or tea shops with full kitchens in the back. All seemed very old but still tidy and clean, and the richness of spice combined with the aromas of food to create a subterranean medley of Middle Eastern smells that flowed into every nook. The people were friendly for the most part, and smiled as they shouted greetings and gave their pitches in Arabic as well as English and other languages - whatever language they thought a potential customer might understand.

I walked through, slowly, until I came to the end of the street where a large fenced-in place, with narrow entrances into a more secure area, was guarded by Israeli soldiers with guns across their backs. I spoke through the fence. "Is the Western Wall close by?" There were three men sitting at a table in the enclosure, looking

through the newspaper. "Is the Wall this way?" I asked again, but no one responded or even looked up. I was an invisible tourist.

I walked out the gate on the far side and through an open archway. Then, just ahead, I could see what had to be the Western Wall. It was bigger, both taller and wider, than I had expected. There was a long sloping ramp that led down to the nearest part of the Wall, and a twin on the opposite end. There were also some bays along a passage at the rear where people could stand and look at the Wall from a distance.

I walked past the first ramp and paused in one of the bays to gaze across the court. When I got to the second ramp, I turned into it to go down to the Wall. Several people called to me and some gestured that I could not enter. "Mister, wait!" I heard, and another voice nearby called, "Don't go in there!" I thought that they knew I was not Jewish and so were refusing entrance, until I saw the dividing fence down the center, separating the two areas that fronted the Wall. I looked carefully and discovered that I was on the wrong side, the one for women. I retreated, made my way to the other ramp, walked slowly along it until I was sure that no one would stop me, and then approached the Wall.

The faithful have placed prayers in the crevices of the Wall for many years, and there they were, slips and bits of paper stuffed into any opening in the stones, every kind of request for God to help them with life's problems, whatever they might be. A different form of prayer; an obvious one, that all could see.

After hesitating for quite awhile, I finally went up to the Wall and found a place between two men who were bobbing before it, side curls swinging beneath tall black hats, and reached my hand out to touch the rock. There was no responding affirmation, no sense of an increase in spiritual vitality, not even any tingling. I hadn't expected anything, but wondered what sensation, if any, I might feel. The Wall felt as it was - a rock, hard and coarse - but as I stood there considering the age and significance of the place, I

suddenly realized that I was touching something majestic beyond its feeling and appearance; something so old that time had no real definition, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with the contemplation of the timelessness of God, and of religion, and faith.

I went back to the Wall for several more visits while I was in the city. I wanted to see it at various times of day and evening; wanted to get a better sense of those who came to it as a place to worship. The last time I was there was on Friday evening - Shabbat, just after sunset when the residual light still reflected from the stone. There were lamps burning all around the perimeter, and I could see the crowds of people who were there under the open sky. Suddenly, a song was begun, and people moved away from the ramp. The singing came from a group of young men who were standing in a tight square in front of the Wall, and as they sang they began to move backward in a dancing step, moving up the ramp, still facing toward the front, dancing and singing as they came. The lines swayed and jumped, all the men with arms interlocked across each other's shoulders, feet dangling, with knees bent in various swift and crooked motions. The effect was of jubilation and celebration.

Groups of young men from *yeshivas* - religious schools - in the area meet each Shabbat at the Wall, then form the square and dance as they depart. There are one hundred men in the square, ten lines of ten, and they create a powerful impact with their finale, paying homage to God as they ascend backward, refusing to turn their backs to The Presence until they reach the top of the ramp.

The days in Jerusalem passed speedily. There was much to experience: museums - The Shrine Of The Book, devoted to the Dead Sea Scrolls - The Old City with its labyrinthine streets and history - The Mount of Olives - The City Of David, a ruin just outside the walled city toward the southeast - Zion Square and the shopping areas of West Jerusalem (not that I did much shopping)

- the pottery and jewelry shops - farmers' markets - old and new houses and public buildings - the University on Mt. Scopus - the green sward where the division of the city had been demarcated (and where some of the buildings have the marks of the bullets and shells used by the Arabs) when it was partly controlled by Jordan; all of these plus so much more. I spent days and evenings going to everything I could find, and in three weeks saw a lot, but didn't spend much time at any one locale in particular, except Bethlehem, and I never got to the Dead Sea, The Galilee, or Masada.

I did go to a place on Nablus Road that is called The Garden Tomb. Far different to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the tomb at this location still looks much as it has for a very long time. It is carved in a rock cliff that supports a Muslim Cemetery on top, and the place is filled with gardens and flowers, terraces and decks that overlook the tomb area. There is more than one old tomb in the rocky wall, but all the attention goes to the one that some Christians believe to be the place where Jesus was buried. It is about the size of the tomb in the church, but is not overlaid with anything; a real rock tomb with two stone shelves on either side of a narrow door with a high sill, where bodies could be laid. A groove was carved in the sill to accommodate a sealing stone, common among tombs of the time. There is a small window cut into the rock beside the door, an accommodation to allow natural light inside so that visitors can see. There is no electric apparatus and there are no candles inside or outside the tomb.

The most interesting thing about the site is, to me, not the tomb itself, but the rock wall some distance to the right of the entrance; a tall outcrop standing above the bus parking garage for the city of Jerusalem. It looks almost like the rounded top of a skull. There are two eye holes beneath, with a small bony nose triangle, but the mouth and jaw has fallen away down the cliff, and the scrabbly remnant of rock is lying along the edge of the parking lot next to

the buses. The Muslim cemetery extends across the top of all of this, and, while no tourist can go in, it bears a stamp of authenticity as a place that once looked very like a skull, just outside the Old City walls of Jerusalem.

While I was there Christian groups were walking around and looking at the garden and tomb, speaking softly, praying, and otherwise attentive to the surroundings. One group was standing on a deck overlooking the area, singing a hymn in a language that sounded Russian.

While riding a bus one afternoon I encountered a family of Americans. They had, I discovered as we rode along, sent their teenage son to a yeshiva in Jerusalem and were visiting him. They got on the bus after me, and the schoolboy sat in the next seat while his parents took the facing seats. Many buses had seats that faced each other, which made it easier to have conversations although that wasn't likely the reason for the arrangement.

The family greeted me with a cheerful "*Shalom*" as they sat down, and I responded with the same. The boy began talking about me almost as soon as the bus rolled into the street. The parents looked anxious as he told them that I was a typical Jewish man, and that I couldn't understand English. I looked out the window in apparent disinterest while he held forth, although his parents were cautioning. "No, he doesn't know that we're talking about him," he said smugly. "He's probably from Germany or Eastern Europe and has never learned English and not even much Hebrew. You can tell he's not religious, at least not very, because he doesn't even wear a *yarmulke*." The boy and his father both wore one of those small skull caps.

"There are lots of people like him here," he said. "They come from all over and live here - I guess because they can. The government just lets them in. You want'ta come live here, Dad?"

His parents were highly entertained as well as enchanted by their clever son.

We continued onward. When we got to my stop I said "*Shalom*" once again, with a polite smile, as I left them. It had been an unusually entertaining ride for me as well.

Apparently buses were my thing in Jerusalem. Another ride was just as interesting, but for a different reason. I was looking for the Israel Museum and had read in the guide that a bus number twelve went there. I found the right bus and rode through the city. I didn't see the museum. I thought it might be further out, so I stayed on the bus and went for a long ride. Finally, after several miles and lots of stops, we entered a cul-de-sac which must have been the very western edge of the suburbs of Jerusalem. The driver turned to me and said, "This is the last stop. If you don't get off here you have to pay another fare to go back."

I told him that I was looking for the Israel Museum, and he said that the stop was on the route, but we had passed it a long time ago. Then he left, saying he'd be back soon. I sat on the bus and waited for over half an hour before he returned from his lunch break and collected my return fee. When we finally got to the stop, he told me, and I left the bus in the middle of a parkway. "The museum is just down there to your right," he said, and it was. About five blocks distance from the bus stop.

On a pleasant winter afternoon I met a lone soldier, Adam, at a small bus stop in West Jerusalem. He was waiting, as I was, for a local bus, and he came up to me, recognizing an American, and started talking. He was from Kansas. Before that he had lived in Chicago, where he grew up. He had left the U.S. after graduating from a university to come to Israel, and had immediately joined the army in order to get his military obligation over with first. We talked about the U.S. and Israel, and despite his emigration, he didn't seem entirely in harmony with all the political ramifications of his new home.

"I don't know," he told me, "what to think about all this." He was referring to the problems with the Palestinians. "I want to

support Israel, but I knew some Arab guys in Kansas, at the University, and they told me their side. It's really hard to understand. I'd like to live in a kibbutz for awhile after the army, and then maybe come back to Jerusalem and go into business for myself. I like it here better than Tel Aviv."

Adam's life goal seemed to be to live within the Jewish state and be of service to its people, a truly noble plan as he expressed it. But he wanted to help bridge the gap between the Arabs and the Israelis, too, and that had seemed impossible once he was finally in the country.

He was eager to talk to Americans and learn about things in the U.S. since he had left. I couldn't help him much - I hadn't been home myself for several months.

Most of the Jewish population in Jerusalem were less friendly than the soldier, even a bit hostile toward outsiders. At times they were discourteous and seemed preoccupied with their own situations and thoughts, which was certainly understandable.

I met or saw these people everywhere in the western part of the city; waitresses who all but refused to give change when I paid the bill, a shopkeeper who carefully ignored me until I nearly forced him to sell me some books and magazines, young boys who were obviously not beggars but came up to me on the street and asked for a "couple of sheks," taxi drivers who grumbled moodily when given a destination address, auto drivers who stared ahead and seemed to want to run right over me when I crossed streets, soldiers and police who ignored questions for directions, and even ignored pleasant greetings - all these people were victims, I decided, of a mentality that told them to ignore everyone except their most trusted circle of family and friends. They seemed to be somewhat paranoid, the "everybody is out to get me" mentality - and they were right. There were people who were out to get them, in a nameless sort of way, and they knew it.

It is very likely that random violence from terrorists had

taught them to think as they seem to do, and to behave accordingly. One early morning at the central bus station I saw people bringing their young soldiers to the buses that would take them to their duties after a night off. There were hundreds of young people getting out of cars, looking for their friends, all loaded with bags and boxes and their ubiquitous guns. The soldiers were exuberant and happy, laughing and hugging each other freely. The parents who had brought them didn't leave their cars, but stared straight ahead into nothing, pain observable in their lined faces, confronting what they had to do, but unwilling to accept the possibility that their own fighter could be one of those young soldiers who would never grow old.

Jerusalem was as much a contradiction as an enigma. It seethed with people and commerce on Friday afternoons, and late on Saturday night everybody seemed to be enjoying family time. On Friday nights and all during the day on Saturday there was a quiet over the city that belied its fears and anxieties. Jerusalem was observing Shabbat, and no one stirred. Traffic was minimal, and only the Arab sector seemed to be alive.

After a week in Jerusalem I decided that it was time to go to Bethlehem. It was a rainy Monday morning when I walked down Nablus Street from St. George's to the Damascus Gate in order to get on a *sherut* - a service taxi - that went to the West Bank, Bethlehem being the first stop. The sheruts were lined along the street opposite the gate, and it was easy to find one that stopped in Bethlehem. I got into it and waited. After nearly half an hour the van filled, everybody paid the few shekels it cost for the trip, and we started out, heading south to Bethlehem. The van drove along the well-ordered streets of Jerusalem, past the German Colony and onward through the southern suburbs until we reached open country, but only a very short stretch was open. The houses that I saw on the hills ahead, I soon discovered, were in Bethle-

hem. We traveled unhindered as we, at some point, left the Jewish area and entered the Palestinian West Bank. At that time there was no check point at all as we went south.

When the taxi stopped in Bethlehem I had a choice, to walk left or right, but was not sure which way to go to find The Church of the Nativity. I didn't need to ask, though, because the street that was on the right side went down into a wide valley, while the left side climbed a hill and disappeared over the top. I looked into the valley; there was nothing there that seemed church-like, so decided to go up to the top of the hill and have a look at the surrounding town on all sides. I expected to see the church from there and find my way to it. I climbed a rather steep incline to get to the top, but there was no sign of the Church of the Nativity. A couple of churches were nearby, but they were marked with different names, and I knew from a quick look that neither was the place I wanted.

From there, the street went on along the top of the hill. I could have descended on either side, but decided to walk along the ridge street for a better chance of finding the church. The morning was damp with threats of rain, but not yet raining much at all. There were cars and donkeys pulling carts in the street, and children were now on their way to school. Stores and houses that looked a bit haphazard with disheveled facades, a lot like those in Egyptian towns, stood along both sides. Steep streets fell away down the hill from the ridgeline, and several cars and small delivery trucks moved along, some climbing diligently up, and a few dropping over the top and down the sides, stopping with difficulty because of the sharp grade, when they came to an intersection.

Into this mix, a large, red car on the ridge street approached a cross street at the same time that another smaller car came up the hill on one side while a truck came up on the other. They all moved into the intersection together, the larger red car bumping

into the truck and the small car at once. A three-way collision. Apparently no one wanted to yield the right of way.

In a moment other cars filled in behind them and soon all were blocked. More cars and trucks and donkey carts moved up in back of the rest until complete gridlock supervened. Honking and shouting filled the air as I walked past, close to the wildly gesticulating, noisy drivers, and continued along the ridge street past a convent and school, until it - the street - dove over the edge of the hill and I looked down to see a large parking lot with the unmistakable Church of the Nativity on the other side.

The hill was steep and the street rough with potholes, but I got down it cautiously and stood looking across the parking lot. The Church of the Nativity was to the right on the other side, and a large sign on the nearest building proclaimed: "Bethlehem Tourist Shopping Center." If ever there was cause to avoid a place, that sign was *it* for me! There was a guest house-hotel on the left, and a large space for bus parking just in front of the spot where I stood. There were no buses at that time, and only a couple of cars near the entrance to the church. The entire area looked nearly deserted.

I saw an extension to the parking lot down a slope just between the tourist shopping center and the church, and a long hillside rose on the other side of the valley beyond the lot. The hillside was divided into many small fields by stone fences, with a small stone house in a corner of most of those fields, many with a television antenna rising from a corner of the flat roof. There was stone everywhere, piled over the hills all around, and the houses and public buildings were all made of that same stone. It was an abundant builder's supply for the taking, as it had been since the beginning of human time. I crossed the parking lot, walked down the drive to the extension, and stood looking out at the hill beyond over a large boundary stone wall.

There were a few sheep in some of the enclosures, and I

thought immediately of the Christmas story and the shepherds who were *abiding* in the fields. The simplicity of that statement came home to me as a wonderfully accurate description of what living conditions must have been like at that time, so long ago, and were still somewhat similar as I stood there centuries - millennia - later. They, the shepherds, had lived out in the fields among the sheep. I realized then that they had no other homes, no other place to go after their night shift was completed. They *lived* there. The thought seemed somehow rather important.

In the beginning of the Christian era, shepherds were notorious for their lack of refinement and education, and were among the poorest of all the local citizenry. I thought about that for a little while, but then, drawn by a greater curiosity, I turned and climbed to the entryway of the church.

The passage into the church was low and narrow, designed in times that were dangerous; not unlike current times. As I stooped to enter, I saw that it was longer than expected, and crept forward despite claustrophobia until I opened the gate at the end and gratefully moved into the entry court. There was no one around; I followed the obvious path to a small door which opened into the nave at the far back of the church. There were lamps lit in niches along the walls, and a glassed-over opening in the floor that showed a mosaic from a much earlier church, still nearly intact. The ceiling was high, with high windows along the sides, and I looked vainly for a sign, or any indicator, that might lead to the place where Jesus had been born. No one else was visible, but I could hear voices from somewhere inside another part of the place. I waited and watched, wandering around slowly, until I saw a priest and two people I assumed to be pilgrims in the distance. They emerged near the sanctuary, the area around the altar, and came down an aisle on the other side to disappear through a far door. I crossed and looked through the opening, but saw only an

empty hallway. At that moment I heard someone else, and turned to see another person coming from the sanctuary.

I went there with lagging feet. I knew that in some churches only the priests were supposed to go into the areas around the altar. All the parishioners waited at the altar rails which stood along the front, just below the sanctuary. I went on, staying clear of the altar, until I saw two small openings in a rounded wall that separated that part of the church from the sanctuary. I looked through the first opening; a spiral stairway descended, and without further consideration I started down. After a long passage with corkscrew-like turnings, the stair ended and I stepped out into the crypt, facing straight onto a small arched grotto overhung with silver candelabra and rich fabric. There was a large silver star set into the marble floor - it was the spot where Christians believe Jesus was born. I was alone in the Grotto of The Church of the Nativity.

At that time I didn't even think about my good fortune. Just a few days earlier, at Christmas - first for the Western Church and about two weeks later for the Eastern - few tourists could have gotten anywhere near The Star in the crypt, and now there was no one but me. I found a seat on a small bench facing toward the archway, and sat staring at it for awhile, attempting to digest and confirm the place and its warm glow. I thought about going up to the arch and reaching down to touch the center of the star, but, as in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, I could not. I have decided since that I didn't want a concrete tactile experience, but wanted the mystery of the Incarnation to remain a mystery. It did not seem to be the same kind of thing as the Western Wall, where I was willing to touch the source. Touching the Wall had meant very little. Looking at the Wall and considering its significance had meant so much more. Touching the center of the star would have seemed the same as touching a cold, hard *thing*, while taking it in visually left room for many other interpretations and

feelings. I chose the mystery for whatever reasons my mental reasonings at that time had in doing so.

I sat in the silent Grotto for nearly half an hour before anyone else came down the stairway. Then, another man, youthful, perhaps a student, came into the room and moved toward the archway. He reached out, but didn't touch the star, then went to sit in another place, to contemplate, I was sure, the Holy Mysteries that surround such sites, and to establish a memory of, and a memory of his *feeling* about, the Grotto of The Church of the Nativity.

The cloister of St. Jerome is attached to The Church of the Nativity through the crypt. I walked along the underground passageways, looking for another exit, and came upon the cloister around a corner from the Grotto. It was fenced and locked, but the cell was still visible. The things St. Jerome is said to have used were there; a table, chair, cot, (although St. Jerome apparently slept on the floor much of the time) and a few other necessities. The whole had been whitewashed, as well as the long passage. Everything looked fresh and far newer than they were in actuality. It was hard to comprehend, standing and peering into the cell, that St. Jerome had done much of his translating and corresponding from that very spot.

I found a different exit through the attached Church of St. Catherine, then went through the low passage and out onto the square where the rain fell gently and clouds hung just above the hill.

I walked back along the ridge route - concerned that I might get lost if I tried a different way - and when I reached the corner where the cars had collided, they were there, the three from the initial impact as well as a few others, still arguing about the situation after more than three hours.

On the return to Jerusalem the sherut was stopped as we left the West Bank. Soldiers with guns slung across their backs came aboard and examined everyone's documents, wordlessly, but

with a sense of urgency and purpose. They told the driver to go ahead, and we did, leaving the checkpoint with a sense of relief, but wondering when and if fighting might erupt there or at some other check-point. The fighting didn't come while I was there, but the expectancy for it never left, either.

Jerusalem is pronounced, in Arabic, *Yahroo'saleem*. Its meaning is, as nearly as I can determine, Heritage of Salem, which perhaps can be restated as *New Salem*. The Jewish name is similar, and Jerusalem seems to hold a very strong influence for all the religions and cultures that inhabit the area, as well as the faithful of all three religions around the world.

A sense of the past is unremitting strong there, as well as a fear of the present, and a longing for a new future. Both the Arabs and the Israelis seem to want the city to be successful, and that is what makes the death and destruction so difficult to understand. I didn't feel particularly fearful or even especially guarded in the city. The chance of becoming a victim is rather slim for a visitor, and on the lovely mornings I spent there, danger was far from my thoughts. I visited the Dome of the Rock as well as the Western Wall and many churches, walked all around the walls of the Old City and through many of its gates - and out again - to go along outside as far as I could. I looked into the Garden of Gethsemane and saw the ancient olive trees; surveyed the Mount of Olives from a distance, with its variety of cemeteries along the slopes. Muslims, Hebrews, and Christians are all buried there in separate but close-together sectors; to my mind a sort of after-death reconciliation.

The new city, or western end of Jerusalem, is far larger than the old, and much more varied. There is every kind of shop and restaurant, hotel and public building, as well as the kinds of residential areas that are usually found in cities, with the addition of holy sites for all the faiths and some things that are unique to Jerusalem. Among those is a miniature "Old City," a three dimen-

sional plan of the city as it is thought to have been at the beginning of the Christian era. The model is designed to make it seem as though one is really gazing into the past, seeing reality from a distance, but it is a reality that is unpeopled and lacks life. Jerusalem has never lacked life, even when it has been described as lying in ruins. The "remnant" has always been there, and has kept the place alive over the centuries.

Zion square, brimming with people most of the time, even in the rain, has shops and markets, bookstores, and famous bars and restaurants that are recommended in most of the guidebooks that tourists bring with them, and is handy to other attractions, museums, and memorials that most people want to see. The bus service is prompt and regular in the western part of town - it is less so in the Arab sector, largely because time and punctuality are of less importance there, a situation that has its own merits. Life for most people pulses with a steady beat, but there is an underlying tension among the citizenry, and that is displayed differently, depending on where you are and who you are with.

I attended a concert at St. George's Cathedral one cold night. There was no heat in the building, and I didn't have a really warm coat, so got thoroughly chilled. I stayed inside the cathedral because it was such a unique and valuable thing to be hearing, and I couldn't tear myself away. A celebrated choir from a college in Minnesota was visiting, singing a variety of sacred songs, ancient to contemporary. I love good choral music and it was exquisite to hear them, along with reverberations from the sound distribution in the cathedral, and to see the young, vigorous, and earnest students performing the sometimes difficult program. But it was the end of the evening that I found most inspirational and interesting. As always, as the program stated, the cathedral organist and a local soprano performed a song, "Pray For The Peace Of Jerusalem" that was wonderfully poignant, but as I went outside, hoping to get to my room quickly so that I could warm up, the choir was

there, just at the exit, standing around a stone fountain, singing the lovely tune of Gustav Holtz' "Jupiter" with the text of "Jerusalem The Golden."

I forgot the cold night, the tourist-weariness I had been feeling, and everything but the music that was lifting and liling above the palm trees in the garden and the cathedral itself, surrounding all within that garden with the *fact* of where we were and what we were, and the hope of peace in that place that had rarely, if ever, known peace. It did not seem impossible to hope for it then.

I have little recollection of the long bus ride back to Cairo, with the exception of the stopover in Rafah. The Egged bus dropped a full load of passengers at the Israeli exit point and we hurried into the building and were soon stamped and outside, crossing the lawn between Israel and Egypt.

I carried all my things to the Egyptian passport control window, and a smiling young man took my passport and examined it. "How do you like living in Cairo?" he asked. "I love it," I told him. "It's home to me now."

"Welcome back to Egypt!" he beamed, soundly stamping several times on the page. Then I was out again, into the sunshine of Egypt, glad to be back and headed for the bus that would take me home.