

## Gaza: Updated

Some time ago, my friend Ann challenged me to make something of my memories of the two years (1970 to 1972) when I lived and worked in the Gaza Strip. Fifty years had passed; time enough for me to have done most of my living and time enough for an independent Palestine to have been born and made peace with her neighbors. But as I wrote and remembered Gaza, it remained under siege, described as an “open-air prison,” its situation far more grim than I’d known in the early years of the Israeli military occupation.

Then in October 2023, in response to the massacre of more than twelve hundred Israeli civilians and military personnel, Israel launched a war of extermination against the Hamas organization in Gaza, never minding the several hundred Israeli hostages hidden there. To date, more than fifty thousand Gazans have died, and Gaza’s Hiroshima landscape makes it uninhabitable. Last week, only one health care facility remained in operation in the northern Gaza Strip: al-Ahli Hospital, the former Baptist Hospital where I once lived and worked.

Today, hours before sunrise on April 13, 2025—coincidentally Palm Sunday—Israeli warplanes targeted al-Ahli Hospital for the fifth time. Although the Israeli Occupation Forces have never provided evidence of *any* hospital sheltering terrorists, they once again claimed that Hamas had established a base of operations there. A telephoned warning less than an hour in advance allowed most of the patients to be evacuated into a street outside the compound, where one of them, a 13-year-old girl, died. Among the ruins is the building I knew as the hospital lab and blood bank; it was leveled. Overlooking its rubble is the apartment that I called home.



*My apartment and rooftop terrace in the hospital compound in 1970 and following the April 2025 bombing.*

Few among even my closest friends were aware of my long-ago adventure, much less its role in shaping my world view and sense of self. Until today, I was reluctant to share what I titled “Gaza” outside that trusted circle. But here you have it. (A gallery of related photos is posted separately as “Gaza Album.”)

Why post it now? An elderly man in Gaza once said to me in halting English, “I’m people, too!” How could I forget his words or cease to care about his people? In reading news accounts of this morning’s attack and viewing images of the disabled hospital, I’m posting “Gaza” in hopes that it presents the Palestinians to you as human beings, wantonly beaten down, tragically ignored, but dogged in their pursuit of justice and joy. The g-word appears nowhere in the document that follows, but Israel’s aggression toward the people of Gaza must be called out for what it is: Genocide. So I ask, How can a people who survived the mass slaughter of millions of their own ancestry so willfully, mercilessly destroy another people? How can the infinitely larger We of the world watch this happen? And I try to imagine some future when the evil truths behind “the Palestinian problem” will be revealed.



# GAZA

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DON ROBERTS

*In 1965, Southern Baptists established the Missionary Journeyman Program. It was modeled after the Peace Corps, recruiting recent college graduates, many of them teachers and medical professionals, to assist foreign missionaries for a period of two years. The assignments were largely secular, promising an opportunity to do some good and have an adventure. I had spent the summer of 1969 as a volunteer camp counselor with the mission in Israel. The Baptist Village near Petah Tiqva, a suburb of Tel Aviv, operated as a vocational boarding high school for Arab boys during the school year, then as an American-style youth camp during the summer months. It had been a gratifying experience, and I came away fascinated by the landscape, history and people of that tiny spot on the globe—enough to apply for a Journeyman post. By then, I'd earned a degree in architecture at Auburn University and was working temporarily as a math teacher's aide at the high school there. The application process was arduous, especially for someone who had no commitment to soul winning or making a career of religion. But I was one of about sixty-five, including several married couples, who made the final cut, destined to spend a couple of years in countries as wildly different as Botswana, Vietnam, and Italy. The program covered all expenses and provided a monthly allowance of twenty-five dollars; upon completion, we would receive separation pay of \$2,400. I was assigned to the medical mission in the Gaza Strip, contingent on surviving eight weeks of training in the summer of 1970.*

*The training was held at a small college in Raleigh, North Carolina. Again in line with the Peace Corps formula, the campus represented a world unto itself with a unique culture defined by a set of rigid rules. It was like an island. A nearby shopping center only existed on Saturdays, when we were allowed to set foot off campus for some afternoon and evening time of our own. Otherwise, the days were thoroughly programmed, beginning at 6:30 with calisthenics and a half-mile run before a full day of classes, research and even competitive sports. The after-dinner activities were something else, from undergoing then-trendy "sensitivity training" to watching and discussing art films by Bergman and Bunuel. The rules were intended to simulate the restrictions of a foreign culture that would be beyond our control or understanding. For example: Pairing*

*off was forbidden. Except in our shared dorm rooms, we were either to be alone or in a group. The mantras were “Be flexible” and “No leaning,” that is, no reliance on another individual for emotional support. We were taught the basics of how to teach English as a second language and how to learn a foreign language, both in principle and in practice through lessons in the pidgin English of New Guinea. Using the very limited resources of the college library, we researched our destination and its culture. I had an advantage, having visited Gaza a year earlier. But there was an undercurrent to the training: We were living under the closest scrutiny, and before the summer ended, some of us would be deemed unsuitable and sent packing.*



Me at Twenty-Four

*That year's crop of Journeymen was a mix of conservatives and liberals in so far as personal faith was concerned, but we'd all come through the sixties and had more in common than not. There were more women than men, and I have no doubt that most, if not all, of the guys were relieved to receive a draft deferment in exchange for their commitment. I certainly was. The war in Vietnam slogged endlessly on—two of my best friends in architecture school had already been drafted and spent a year there—and the first draft lottery in November 1969 meant that I was numbered: 163. I had grown up Baptist, but had never been comfortable with evangelism and always steered clear of sanctimony. Although I'd served as president of Auburn's liberal-minded Baptist Student Union, there wasn't much “religion” on my sleeve to show for it. That spring, I'd tutored Black high school students (in French of all things) in advance of their integrating all-white Auburn High School the following fall. To me, that was Religion. I didn't interpret the Bible literally, just picked through it for whatever had meaning in the moment. The Golden Rule said it all. My interests lay squarely in the secular world, and I had always been just religious enough to get by. To me, doubt was as essential as faith. After plugging away through Auburn's five-year architectural curriculum, I faced doubt about becoming an architect. I had interned with a prominent firm one summer and was nowhere near ready to return to a roomful of older men, sitting over a drafting table day after day, waiting to be drafted into the army. So I signed on as a Journeyman in hopes of making a difference in Gaza and getting my bearings before proceeding any further through life. It's often been said that we live life forward, but understand it backwards. Now, fifty years later, this is that experience as only I remember and understand it.*



**JANUARY 16, 1972** Most of the lights in the men's ward had been turned off, and the patients were sleeping. It was nine o'clock on a Sunday night, when the two young men who were their nurses relaxed with cups of hot tea in the cramped space that served as a nurse's station. They were in their twenties, but we called them "the boys." Like most nights, they had phoned my apartment on the hospital compound and invited me to join them. Whoever was pouring always said, "I know you like it sweet," before stirring in a spoonful of sugar. They had a lust for learning, and we could talk for an hour about anything under the sun. That night it was Africa. Then one of them answered the ringing phone and handed me the receiver. It was a call from Ava Nell McWhorter, who supervised the hospital's nursing staff: "I need you to come up to my apartment right now."

### **The Mission Family**

Eight days earlier I'd returned from a long vacation in Kenya and Tanzania, refreshed and ready to complete the remaining five months of my term in Gaza. When I got there in late August 1970, I became the sixteenth adult member of what was called the Mission Family. Eleven women and five men. There were four married couples (with seven children), five older single women and two Journeyman women who had just completed their first year. This was a medical mission, and by profession they were three physician-surgeons, five nurses, a lab technologist, a physical therapist and the business manager. For visa purposes, my job title was "assistant business manager." Ed Nicholas, the only ordained Baptist minister among them, oversaw the hospital finances and its facilities. His wife Anne had recently opened a lending library called the Center of Culture and Light in what passed for an upscale neighborhood a mile or so from the hospital. It was the first public library in Gaza. She also organized the mission church's activities for teenagers and children. I was to work under her supervision at the library and church, and also run hospital errands for Ed. Unlike everyone else in the Mission Family, my work was non-medical and, for the most part, secular.

Every three or four years, the career missionaries were furloughed to the States. Their six or twelve months back home provided rest, renewal and family reunion. They would also visit churches, reporting on their work and needs. The missionary stereotype is of the supremely dedicated, self-sacrificing saint, enduring hardship. Given our proximity to the modern nation of Israel, there wasn't much hardship, just numerous inconveniences. The missionaries I got to know in Gaza were ordinary people with some extraordinary skills and many saintly qualities. Each one of them was there because they'd experienced an inner calling to serve, and none dwelt on having made a sacrifice. They were people of deep faith, but not fanatical. I admired their dedication to giving the best of themselves, often under the most trying of circumstances. I remember them all as good people and good to me:



- **Ed and Anne Nicholas**, then in their late forties, were the pillars of the Mission Family. They met and married while serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, drawn together by their long-held, shared desire to become missionaries. They had been appointed to Gaza in 1958. By the time I arrived, both had a good command of Arabic. Good-natured, easygoing Ed was a man who took calamity and conflict in stride. More of his time was spent in the office, tending to the hospital's very complicated finances, than serving as its chaplain. Each month, more than a thousand refugees received medical services free of charge. Ed oversaw the reimbursements by the United Nations agency that paid for them, saw that hospital employees were compensated, ordered everything from food and medical supplies to imported vehicles, and much, much more. He quietly kept everything going. His traditional missionary work appeared to be limited to coordinating early morning chapel services for the hospital employees, dealing with the Arab church pastor and preaching on Sunday evenings.

One had only to look at wiry, petite Anne to know she was the sort of person who never stopped moving, getting things done. She was feisty and smart, and never wasted a minute. My admiration of her was endless. Most missionary couples had children, and the wife's mission work was overshadowed by responsibility for their education and well-being. The children could certainly benefit from growing up immersed in a foreign culture, but ensuring that their childhood was emotionally healthy was a challenge. Anne had done a remarkable job of home-schooling their four. Their son had recently entered Baylor University; the two teenaged girls were boarding students at the American International School in a Tel Aviv suburb; and their youngest daughter was still at home. All were well-adjusted, outstanding students. They had grown up in a house on the hospital compound, but the family had recently moved to one in the fairly upscale Rimal District near the beach, where houses were detached from one another and built in a more European style. Everyone else lived on the compound.

- **Dr. Merrill and Patty Moore**, both in their late thirties, had been appointed to serve in Gaza six years earlier and had only recently returned from furlough in Tennessee with their young daughter and newly adopted infant son. Patty was beautiful, and Merrill was tall and fresh-scrubbed handsome. His calm and intelligence contributed to his being the consummate surgeon. He was deliberate and articulate, weighing his words carefully, and when he spoke, people listened. (I would later learn that one of the Muslim nursing students said that Allah must be like Dr. Moore.) The Moores lived with a Siamese cat in a large, comfortable house on the compound, a one-minute quick walk to the operating room. I was intrigued by the enormous clay amphora (a vessel used in ancient times for storing or transporting olive oil or wine) that stood propped in one corner of their living room. Easily five-feet tall, it probably belonged in a museum. While Merrill was reserved, Patty was outgoing and engaging. She, perhaps more than anyone else in the Mission Family, empathized with the isolation and restraints we Journeymen felt. She had taught school and was home-schooling their seven-year-old adopted daughter, Melissa, who had a mind of her own and, in light of having a new baby brother, demanded constant attention.

- **Dr. Roy and Orlene McGlamery** had served as missionaries in Colombia in the late 1940s and early '50s before settling in Ripley, Mississippi, her hometown. They were in their late fifties when they arrived in Gaza in 1969. In addition to seeing patients, "Doctor Mac" was the hospital's medical director. He was a kind man with a sort of grandfatherly dignity that elicited trust and respect. I barely got to know him. Mrs. McGlamery had grown up a Southern belle and become a grande dame. I found her fascinating. Their spacious home on the compound dated from early in the century. Constructed with vaulted ceilings and patterned tile floors, it was graciously furnished with items they'd shipped from home. Most of the Mission Family employed Arab men or women as part-time helpers in their homes, but the McGlamerys had a full-time servant named Amna. This poor woman worked hard to please the imperious Mrs. McGlamery and always seemed to be tipping toward a nervous breakdown.

- **Ann Dwyer**, a 48-year-old nurse, had arrived in Gaza in 1954, eventually transferred to the Baptist hospital in Jordan and returned in 1968. She was head nurse of the women's ward on the hospital's second floor and lived in one of the tiny apartments on the floor above. Six-feet tall, Ann kept her red hair short, and a pair of reading glasses always dangled from a cord that circled her neck. She had a soft voice, a hearty disposition, a strong will and a sort of naïvete. She related easily to the older Arab women who attended church services, for which she played the piano. Ann had become perfectly at home in the Middle East, so far away from the community in rural Virginia where she'd grown up, and it seemed to me that there could be no other life for Ann Dwyer than as a foreign missionary nurse.

- **Ava Nell McWhorter**, then in her early forties, was the director of nursing and a tower of power. A tall, athletic woman, she had arrived six years earlier. She had been a major in the Air Force Reserve, and nothing and no one intimidated her. Half of the nursing staff were men, and only a woman with the authority Ava Nell commanded could hope to earn and maintain their respect. She lived in a third-floor apartment above the out-patient clinic at the center of the compound, removed from the other single women. In addition to supervising the nurses, she oversaw the gardening, the laundry, the sewing room and the hospital kitchen. She was everywhere, and there really wasn't anything she couldn't do and do well. Only she and Merrill ever seemed to make use of the compound's tennis court, where she played to win. Ava Nell could be blunt and Ava Nell could be tender; whichever, she was absolutely true to herself.

- **Dr. Jean Dickman** and Bertha Jane Marshall returned from furlough in the months after I arrived. Jean, a surgeon from Florida, was then 43 years old, and I was immediately struck by her delicate beauty and sparkling eyes. She appeared to be at least ten years younger and did nothing to enhance or call attention to her loveliness. Jean had come to Gaza in 1957. I imagined her suturing a wound with stitches as tiny, close and precise as fine embroidery. She and Ann Dwyer had the longest history with the hospital, were next-door neighbors on its third floor and had developed a sisterly friendship. *Doctora* Dickman, as she was known around the hospital, was fun loving, strong willed and just a bit shy.

- **Bertha Jane Marshall**, the 39-year-old director of the nursing school, was back from a short furlough with her family in Evansville, Indiana. Known as B.J., she had overseen the nursing school at the Baptist Hospital in Kyoto, Japan, before transferring to the Gaza Mission in 1968. She was another imposing woman and declared, "I'm not afraid of anything," as though saying it often enough made it true. She lived in an apartment on the ground floor of the school and girls dormitory. B.J. was fond of purple and pretty things, and her apartment was decorated with Japanese scrolls and a prized collection of ceramic frogs. Her voice had an engaging musical quality, and she was an ace storyteller. She had handpicked the young women and men—all Muslim, all refugees—for the three-year nursing program. To some, she was the strict disciplinarian; to others, the doting parent.

- **Jarrell and Shirley Peach** were straddling their twenties and thirties, which made them the first of the next generation of the Mission Family. They were relative newcomers, having arrived from Missouri the previous winter, time enough to have settled into a year of language study in Bethlehem. Jarrell was a physical therapist, charged with establishing the hospital's first P.T. department and training program. He was bright and self-assured, with a sort of cockiness that I appreciated. He wasn't the type to sit and stew; if something needed to be said, he said it. Shirley, with her dazzling smile and ready laugh, was like a warming burst of sunshine. She could restore peace and calm to any situation. Their two preschool children, Cari and Jay, were miniature versions of themselves. Jarrell and Shirley would become my closest friends in the mission, like a big brother and sister.

- **Mavis Pate** supervised the hospital's operating room. A small woman with graying hair, she was practically born to a career in nursing. As it turned out, a distinguished career she couldn't have imagined as a child in small-town Ringgold, Louisiana. In 1960, she was appointed supervisor of the surgical suite on the year-long maiden voyage of the S.S. *Hope*, an 800-bed floating hospital that brought free medical care to remote areas of Southeast Asia. Her medical mission appointment began with Thailand four years later, followed by Bangladesh and finally Gaza in early 1970. She was then 44 years old. She had arrived six months ahead of me and, after four months of Arabic study alongside the Peaches in Bethlehem, was finally at work. Studying Arabic was an opportunity she hadn't welcomed, having already endured intensive studies in Thai and Bengali. The hospital's Arab personnel would find her Southern accent confounding. She already had a friend in Ava Nell; they had gotten acquainted in Shreveport eighteen years earlier. Mavis would say that white was her favorite color, but she was partial to a rich turquoise blue. They represented her two sides: white, the strict, disciplined, demanding Mavis in an O.R. that had to be perfectly sterile and function with perfect precision; turquoise, the good humored, fun-seeking Mavis apart from work. She was deeply introspective and had a brilliant mind that allowed her to revel in life's ironies.

- **Glynda Chambers and Judy Adams** were, like me, Journeyman volunteers and had completed their first year. We were introduced when I arrived at the Tel Aviv airport. Coincidentally, their return flight from a vacation on Cyprus landed within minutes of mine from London, and Anne Nicholas was waiting for us. It was a Sunday night, and the Gaza border was closed, so we spent that night at a hotel in Ashkelon, Israel, six or seven miles north of the border. Glynda, from Illinois, was soulful, outgoing and easy to get to know; she worked as a nurse in the children's ward and played the guitar. Judy, a proper Virginian, supervised the lab, the blood bank and laboratory training program, which may account for her every word and action being so precisely measured. She also sponsored a Bible study group of young Arab Christian girls. Glynda and Judy were nothing alike, but not unlike the good friends I'd left behind, and, given that familiarity, I looked forward to hanging out with them. But a previous Journeyman nurse had become romantically involved with one of the Muslim male nurses, which was judged as scandalous, especially in the eyes of the Christian Arabs. This resulted in the mission becoming acutely sensitive to Journeymen developing relationships that might be misinterpreted or divisive—and ruled out our casual socializing. People watched; people listened; people talked. The three of us seemed to have everything in common except the freedom to enjoy it. But we had gotten through Journeyman training—be flexible; don't lean—and accepted this as a cultural restriction beyond our control. The apartment they shared in the nursing school building was off limits to me, and mine to them, but an old Volkswagen Beetle known to all as “the Bug” was assigned to the three of us. I would enjoy their company at monthly mission meetings and holiday gatherings, visits to the U.N. Beach Club, a picnic at an Ashkelon park and a getaway or two to Jerusalem. There would also be awkward times when they seemed to compete for my attention. Our situation was frustrating and would remain so until they departed nine months later.

There was an intensity to life in the mission that was an aspect of the serious, everyday business of healing and saving lives. We Americans were drawn close because we were so few, living in the midst of hundreds of thousands of sad, angry disenfranchised people. The size of the Mission Family would fluctuate over time. Summer volunteers would come and go; and two additional families and another Journeyman would be employed over the course of my time there.

## This Place Called Gaza

*Gaza* is more correctly pronounced like the word *gas* than the word *gosh*. In Hebrew, it's AH-za. I knew only the essence of its history when I arrived, and one can't begin to understand or appreciate that sandy speck of crowded land without an understanding of its geography and a review of its past.

What is known as the *Gaza Strip*, about 25 miles long and from four to seven miles wide, lies along the sandy southeasternmost shore of the Mediterranean. It was only after 1948 that the words *Gaza Strip* began appearing on maps. Gaza City, its commercial center, is one of the world's oldest inhabited cities. Built on a hill several miles from the coast, it served as a strategic seaport on the ancient trade route between Asia and Europe. The Greek historian Herodotus in the 5th century B.C.E. was the first to use the word *Palaistine* to describe the coastal land from Phoenicia (present-day Lebanon) south to Egypt. Alexander the Great captured Gaza in 332 B.C.E., but that was practically recent history. Gaza has been inhabited since at least the 15th century B.C.E., passing from one conqueror to the next—Egyptian, Philistine, Israelite, Assyrian, Persian, Greek, Roman—until the 4th century A.D. when the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and declared religious tolerance throughout the Byzantine Empire. The 5th century brought the destruction of Gaza's temples dedicated to Zeus, Aphrodite, Athena and six other pagan gods, and the establishment of Christian churches. Gaza was in its heyday in the 6th century, having supplanted Athens as the empire's most prominent center of literary and philosophical study. The principal spoken language was then Greek, supplemented by Latin. The city was said to have been a metropolis of handsome classical architecture. A visitor in the year 570 wrote: "Gaza is a splendid city, full of pleasant things; the men in it are most honest, distinguished by every liberality, and warm friends of visitors."

In 634, Muslim Arabs swept through the Byzantine and Persian empires, conquering the entire Middle East. Unlike the Babylonians, Romans and Persians, these conquerors refrained from pillage and destruction. Although Islam preached tolerance of the Jewish and Christian religions, most of the Christians in Gaza eventually converted to Islam, and many of their churches became mosques. By the 10th century, the Arabic language prevailed over Greek, Latin and Aramaic. The Crusaders arrived in the Holy Land around 1100 and occupied it for a murderous century, targeting Jews and Muslims, before Muslim governance and religious tolerance were restored. Gaza in 1300 was described as "a city so rich in trees it looks like a cloth of brocade spread out upon the land."

With such a long history, it's surprising that Gaza is known for next to nothing. It gave its name to gauze, *gazzatum* in medieval Latin, the loosely woven fabric used for bandaging that is said to have originated there. Its one Biblical association is the story of the Israelite judge Samson, who was wooed by the harlot Delilah, blinded, shorn of his hair and imprisoned by the Philistines in Gaza before developing the strength to topple its temple of Dagon, losing his own life. It's an enduring tale that added some spice and super heroics to the Old Testament's Book of Judges, whether true or not.

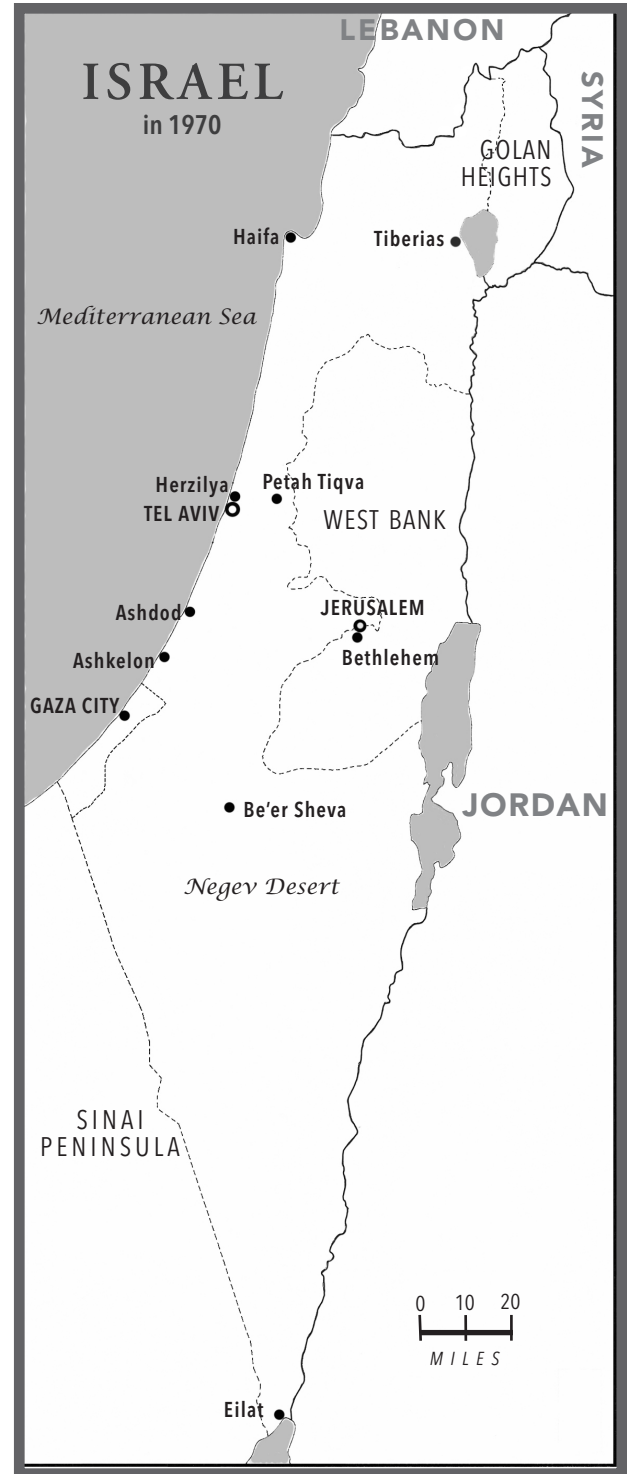
In the 16th century, Palestine was swallowed up by the Ottoman Empire and organized into three states: Jerusalem, Gaza and Nablus. Centuries passed in relative tranquility, until 1799 when Napoleon Bonaparte captured Gaza. He described its hills as covered with "forests of olive trees" that reminded him of Languedoc in southern France. The Ottomans eventually reclaimed Palestine, and in 1838 Gaza's population outnumbered Jerusalem's. In World War I, the British captured Palestine and became its mandatory ruler under the League of Nations. They established railroads that connected Mandate Palestine with Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan. But beginning in 1920 and continuing for nearly three decades, Zionist paramilitary organizations challenged British authority, carrying out violent terrorist attacks against British institutions as well as Arab villages. Out-of-the-way Gaza, however, flourished in the years between the two world wars as a center of trade and agriculture. In 1946, Gaza City was populated by 37,800 Muslims and 1,300 Christians. The day the British Mandate ended in 1948, war broke out between the Zionists, many of whom were refugees from war-torn Europe, and the neighboring Arab countries led by Egypt. The Brits pulled out, leaving the unarmed Arabs of Palestine without an army to protect them, much less a leader to represent and guide them.

I'd never lived in a place so permeated by history, but for Gazans in 1970, history seemed to have begun



*It was only after 1948 that maps first designated the State of Israel and the Gaza Strip. Since 1967, maps of Israel have included the territories it captured in the Six Day War: Syria's Golan Heights, Jordan's West Bank, the Gaza Strip and, until 1979, Egypt's vast, barren Sinai Peninsula. Israel today, including the disputed territories, is slightly larger than New Jersey.*

*Gaza is a 25-mile long strip of land protruding into Israel on the Mediterranean coast. At 139 square miles, it covers less area than my hometown, Birmingham, Alabama. In 2020, its population numbered more than two million, a large majority of whom are Palestinian refugee families. Some live within ten miles of the homes they evacuated in 1948 and would never see again. The driving distance from Gaza City to Tel Aviv is 47 miles; to Jerusalem, 60 miles.*



after the war in 1948. Some say the Palestinian Arabs left their homes voluntarily or at the urging of Arab leaders, but those claims are not supported by the historical record. The vast majority of the 750,000 Palestinians displaced in 1947 and 1948 fled as a direct result of targeted violence and threats to their safety, with Jewish forces systematically depopulating entire villages. As a result, approximately 200,000 Palestinians from 144 towns and villages took refuge in the countryside around Gaza City, confident that they would eventually return to their homes, farms and businesses. But when the fighting ceased, barbed-wire borders were quickly established, isolating Gaza and its countryside from the new nation called Israel. There would be no going home, ever, for the displaced Palestinians in this territory that would be known thereafter as the Gaza Strip. It would be administered by Egypt, which to them was a foreign country except for the language and primary religion they held in common. The Palestinians had become a people without a nation.

Within a year, the fledgling United Nations organized an agency specifically to aid the Palestinian refugees in Gaza, Lebanon and Jordan. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA, pronounced UN-rah) was intended to provide temporary assistance until the refugee issue could be resolved diplomatically, but Israel's borders stood impregnable to reason and goodwill, and UNRWA would expand its mandate to provide food, education, health care, building materials and social services for generations of refugees ever after.

*It must be noted that UNRWA was and continues to be largely funded by the United States—a heavy, heavy price to pay for the Truman administration's not having insisted on a just resolution to the Palestinian refugee crisis.*

When the Egyptian government nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 and raised tolls on the passage of oil tankers, England and France joined Israel in a military attempt to take control of the critical waterway. Egypt closed the canal in October when Israel led the attack from the north. The Israeli Army occupied the Gaza Strip from then until March 1957, when Egypt emerged victorious through diplomatic intervention and troops were withdrawn. The Suez Crisis was the prelude to what happened a decade later. Although the canal had reopened, tensions between Egypt and Israel festered. In May 1967, Egypt blockaded the Straits of Tiran, halting shipping to and from Israel's port at Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba. Egypt then began mobilizing its offensive forces as well as Jordan's and Syria's along their borders, but Israel struck first on June 5 and quickly gained the upper hand. After six days, the Arab forces were defeated and Israel had captured Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, including Gaza; Jordan's West Bank, including East Jerusalem; and Syria's mountainous, barely inhabited Golan Heights.

Gazans had lived under Israeli military occupation for three years when I arrived. By then there were 400,000 refugees, and everyone depended on Israel, their oppressor, for water, electricity and communication with the rest of the world. The large *souk* (outdoor market) and tiny open-front shops that lined the main thoroughfare remained active, but cafés, cinemas and banks were shuttered. Israeli control was absolute and primarily intended to intimidate. Teams of armed soldiers patrolled the sidewalks as jeeps and truckloads of soldiers lumbered past on the main streets, flaunting their dominance. Terrorists, whom the people called *freedom fighters* and *commandos*, regularly lobbed grenades at their occupiers, inevitably resulting in the murder and maiming of bystanders. There was usually a general curfew, its hours fluctuating as terrorist activity rose and fell, then surged again. The streets that hummed with activity by day were desolate after dark, and dark it was. The Baptist Hospital stood within a walled compound occupying the southeast corner of Palestine Square, the heart of the city.

## The Hospital and Nursing School

The Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) had first financed a modest medical clinic in Gaza City in 1881 and got around to constructing a modern forty-bed hospital there in 1907. It was then the only such facility between Port Said, Egypt, and Jaffa, Palestine, and would remain the only hospital in the city until 1946 when a former British army barracks was turned into a quarantine treatment center, the forerunner of al-Shifa Government Hospital. About 1952, the Anglican hospital was sold to the Southern Baptists, who made surgical medicine its specialty. The Baptists were education minded and also established a nursing school.

*I would later learn that the Anglicans' ownership of the compound land was in question when the Baptists purchased it. By agreement, no money was to be exchanged until title to the land was established once and for all. At the outbreak of the Six Day War, several old Gaza families were attempting to legally reclaim the compound, which the Baptists were yet to pay for. The ensuing military occupation halted judicial processes, and the mission was carrying on with that worry pushed aside.*



*The Newly Constructed Hospital, 1907*

The original, two-storied Church Missionary Society hospital was constructed in the British colonial style by stonemasons, most likely from dressed limestone. Its wide central staircase connected the patient wards, which opened onto verandas and balconies. A mission church and residence were also constructed. The hospital suffered severe damage during the first world war and was rebuilt in the 1920s. Over the years, it was expanded and other facilities added within the walled compound. Most of the old stone structures had

been “modernized” in the early 1960s with a coating of cement over the beautiful stonework. The men’s ward, the single private patient room, the O.R. and kitchen filled the ground floor; the children’s, maternity and women’s wards were on the second. A third floor had been added to provide three small apartments for resident members of the staff. While remarkable advances had been made in medicine and patient care in its six decades, some of the patients’ beds in 1970 might well have been as old as the hospital. There was no central heating, no air-conditioning. Laundresses pressed the bed linens, patients’ gowns and pajamas, nurses uniforms and surgical gowns using flatirons heated by blowtorch.

The 75-bed hospital dominated a compound of about four acres surrounded by a high, thick wall. The hodgepodge of buildings included the recently constructed, three-storied nursing school and dormitory, a dining hall for the students and staff, the out-patient clinic and pharmacy, the newly constructed laboratory building, the business office, the morgue and a carpenter shop with a sleeping room above for the male nurses. Also: three comfortable homes (one of which by then was used only for Sunday school), a total of eight apartments, a tennis court, a basketball court and the original Anglican church. The church was unadorned and simple in design; the immersion baptistry that the Baptists added saw little use. This was the only Protestant, non-orthodox church in the Gaza Strip and, for that matter, south of Jerusalem.

In addition to the American medical staff, the hospital also employed two excellent Palestinian physicians, both from native Gaza families. Dr. Hatem Abu Gazala was a well-to-do, westernized Muslim who spoke English fluently and talked about opening a restaurant specializing in falafel and hummus in New York City. (To my mind in those days, a crazy idea...) Doctora Sylvia Tarazi, a pretty Greek Orthodox woman in her twenties had lived in South Carolina and enjoyed the friendship of Glynda and Judy. The versatility of the five doctors was amazing. They treated walk-in patients' common ailments and broken bones, then turned on a dime to deliver a baby or provide lifesaving emergency care.

The support staff was enormous: nurses; laboratory, X-ray and operating room technicians; an anesthetist; pharmacists; cleaners (as orderlies were called); office workers; a switchboard operator; a dietician and cooks; laundresses; seamstresses; gatekeepers; carpenters; a driver-mechanic; and a gardener. The kitchen was small and hardly modern, but miraculously turned out three simple meals a day for patients with varying dietary needs as well as for the students and staff. The hospital couldn't have functioned without each one of them.

The official name of the nursing school was the School of Health Sciences, and it also offered training programs in laboratory, X-ray and operating room procedures. The Baptists had purchased land adjoining the compound on which they'd recently built the three-storied school and dormitory—the most modern building I ever saw in Gaza. Several classrooms, a large meeting room, a recreation room with a ping-pong table, B.J.'s office and her apartment comprised the ground floor. The two floors above were an American-style dormitory, except for the apartment Glynda and Judy shared. Before the Six Day War, the student nurses were primarily Christian Arab women, mostly from Egypt and Lebanon, but now they were all young Muslim refugee women and men. (Muslim adult patients required nurses of their same gender.) Seven boys and seven girls entered the program each year. Recruiting capable young men was easy, but Muslim families benefitted more from their daughters marrying than their pursuing a career, and Ava Nell had worked hard to promote nursing as a desirable option for young women. They lived in two worlds: Whenever they entered or exited the compound, a shapeless black garment covered their Western-style clothes; and a scarf, their hair.

Having studied basic English in the UNRWA schools, the students were amazing in their ability to become conversant in its application to medical subjects. All of them gained practical experience in the hospital, and uniforms distinguished first-year students from the older students, and the graduate nurses from the students. Upon completion of the first year, the boys were ceremoniously capped with what can only be described as an American soda jerk's cap. The girls simply shed the aprons they wore; upon graduation two years later they would receive a traditional nurse's cap. The difference in maturity, poise and confidence between an entering first-year student and a graduate was a testament to the thoroughness of the education they received. The program called for each one to spend three years studying, working and sleeping in the compound, constantly exposed to American and Christian influence. Along with other hospital workers, their days began with a devotional in the church. It was led by a member of the Mission Family, whose words were translated into Arabic, and ended with a hymn and a prayer for the day ahead. Student participation was mandatory, though not enforced, and attendance was good. I'm told they enjoyed singing the Christian hymns. This was, from what I observed, the mission's only proselytizing directed toward Muslims.

Charity hospitals are busy, often frantic, places. Their door is open to all, and when the compound gates swung open each morning, there were dozens of people waiting to visit the out-patient clinic or pharmacy. Others would arrive in a steady stream throughout the day; those visiting a patient almost always brought food from home. Ambulances came and went, most often transferring patients to or



from the al-Shifa Government Hospital. But then, too often, an Israeli jeep would speed recklessly through the gate, rushing a bleeding victim of a sidewalk grenade attack to the O.R.

Compared to the hustle of dusty Palestine Square just outside its gate, the compound was a haven of calm and care. There was no place like it anywhere in the Gaza Strip. The grounds were green and beautiful, with well-tended lawns and gardens shaded by lofty trees and date palms. To my amazement, poinsettias grew ten feet high. A marble column, most likely from the sixth-century Byzantine era and easily 15-ft. tall, stood in the forecourt of the church just below my apartment. Other columns and Corinthian capitals lay scattered here and there on the compound grounds, and a couple of columns had even been reused in the construction of one of the old, nondescript hospital buildings. Each relic of antiquity was a silent reminder of an unimaginable Gaza lost over time, and there was no telling what lay buried below the compound.



*The Compound Entrance from Palestine Square*

## The Mission

A medical mission is a hospital facility, first and foremost, but underlying the diagnoses, the babies delivered and the dispensing of medicine lies its mission of proselytizing, “inducing someone to convert to one’s faith.” Members of the Mission Family were united and sincere in that goal, but the constant and pressing demands of their medical work came first. They also faced the unlikelihood of converting Muslims to Christianity. The Muslims already worshipped the same deity, respected the same commandments and enjoyed the same unquestioning adherence to their faith. (That’s not to say there aren’t monumental—sometimes ghastly—differences between the two religions.) Islam was the fabric of their society, and for one to become a Christian meant expulsion from family and from a way of life that was set in their bones. Everyone knew that conversion would be a giant leap with grievous consequences. But what Muslims would willingly, gratefully accept from the mission were medical treatment, secure jobs, training and education.



*Forecourt of the Compound Church, 1958*

The military occupation that followed the Six Day War had prostrated Gaza City’s local government, which in the past had strictly limited evangelistic activity. The mission heartily opposed the occupation, but with the Israelis in command of almost every aspect of life, the prohibitions against Christian activity were relaxed. Muslim clerics could only watch and preach, and the military government had more important considerations than whatever influence a little Baptist mission could muster. It’s doubtful a lending library that ultimately aimed to distribute Christian literature would have otherwise been allowed.

There were perhaps as many as fifteen Arab church members who could be described as full-fledged Baptists, while a couple dozen Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic teenagers were drawn to the church's youth activities. None of them would have anything to do with the supposedly inferior Muslims, who seemed to ignore their hostility. These Christians were good people, but not in the mold of the good Samaritan. It was the bigotry I had grown out of in Alabama, and it troubled me. I was surprised that the Christian young adults didn't take advantage of the nursing school, which offered a free education that translated easily into an essential lifelong occupation. Several had completed the laboratory training program, but they regarded nursing as dirty work, which it certainly could be at times, and denied themselves that opportunity. The churchgoers appreciated the hospital when they were ill, but seemed to have no concept of the spirit that motivated the American medical missionaries and their unqualified devotion to all Gazans. Over time, I realized that what the mission was accomplishing of significant and lasting value was on the operating table, in the hospital clinic and wards, and in the classroom. A nursing diploma could recast the lifetime prospects of a 21-year-old Palestinian refugee.

### September and October 1970

A few days after my arrival in late August, I was dropped off in Bethlehem, six miles south of Jerusalem, for two months of tutored Arabic language study. Arabic is, like Hebrew, a Semitic language. Both are written from right to left, and many words are the same or similar in both languages. Arabic is also the language of the Koran, and one would be hard pressed to speak it without invoking *allah* at some point in a conversation or even a simple greeting. For an English speaker, Arabic is said to be second only to Chinese as the most challenging language to master.

Arrangements had been made for me to study with Jalil Irany, an elderly scholar of classical Arabic. His teaching focused as much on reading and writing the beautiful, fluid script as on conversation. We used the textbook he'd coauthored twenty years earlier, *Standard Colloquial Arabic*, and a mimeographed booklet of vocabulary and expressions compiled by the Jerusalem YWCA. In two two-hour sessions, five days a week, we sat across from each other at a small table while he taught me the alphabet and dictated words for me to transcribe. It was more of an exercise in calligraphy than language learning, but whatever artist was in me enjoyed the challenge of writing from right to left. After each first hour, about the time my mind went numb, his wife would appear with cups of hot tea that got us through another hour. The sixth lesson included the word for "molar tooth," which I suspected I'd never have cause to utter much less write. I wanted to be able to converse in Arabic and was getting nowhere.

Although Bethlehem lies within the occupied West Bank, terrorist activity was limited and the military presence minimal. Tourism drove its economy; the Church of the Nativity on Manger Square had welcomed Christian pilgrims since about 330 A.D. The townspeople were mostly Christian, and there were churches everywhere. A large mosque facing the Church of the Nativity had been built in 1860, but there were no Protestant Christian churches. I walked wherever I went, wandering the backstreets of Bethlehem and Jerusalem's Old City, fascinated by the sights, sounds and smells, but too self-conscious to attempt speaking Arabic. The duplex apartment was on the outskirts of the town, isolated in a grove of old, old olive trees—hardly anything there was simply old—and I was entertained watching a farmer harvest the ripened fruit, shaking the limbs so the purple morsels fell onto a cloth spread over the ground below. At night, when I should've been practicing the slants, loops and dots of the words from the day's lessons, I was writing letters home, listening to broadcasts of the Voice of America and the BBC World Service, practicing chords on my guitar and reading books I'd purchased at Steimatzky's Bookstore on Jaffa Road in Jewish West Jerusalem.



In mid September, the Mission held a weekend retreat at Tiberias on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, which is nothing more than a very large lake. It was an opportunity to get acquainted with the people who would become like family over the next couple of years. We stayed at a convent that provided meals, and that Saturday night, as we sat on the terrace overlooking the calm waters, the eastern sky occasionally flared with what appeared to be summer lightning. Two weeks earlier, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine had hijacked three commercial jets, holding their passengers hostage before exploding the planes. Nothing like that had happened before. The worldwide attention that followed, although entirely condemning, emboldened the Palestinian Liberation Organization (P.L.O.) to challenge King Hussein of Jordan. Three years earlier, Egypt had lured Jordan into the Six Day War, in which Hussein suffered the loss of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Jordan had peacefully coexisted with Israel before the war, and the P.L.O. objected to Hussein's moderate stance in the years since. What lighted the sky that September night was the Jordanian Civil War. King Hussein would win, but the month would be remembered as Black September, when organized Arab terrorism clicked into gear. *Terrorism* was practically a new word to me.

Before the first month in Bethlehem ended, Jarrell and Shirley Peach returned from Gaza to resume their studies with Mr. Irany. Before my arrival, Jarrell had contracted hepatitis and was hospitalized in Gaza. Now, they and their two young children were back, living in the adjacent apartment, and I took to them like long-lost cousins. Still weakened, Jarrell would patiently teach me to drive their stick-shift Volkswagen; Shirley would feed me; and Cari and Jay would be a constant and tireless source of delight. Jarrell, Shirley and I were the youngest, newest members of the mission.

In October, a letter arrived with the sad news that the Journeyman assigned to Malawi had suffered a severe spinal cord injury in a diving accident only five weeks after arriving. Within a few months, one of the married couples and another of the guys would resign and also return home.

It seemed like someone from the Mission Family was always studying Arabic in Bethlehem, and the mission had established a warm relationship with the Tabash family, who owned a tourist shop on Manger Square. It was several cuts above all the other purveyors of olive-wood and mother-of-pearl souvenirs. Among their merchandise were olive-wood figures carved by a superb craftsman. They were expensive, but I would save my allowances and eventually purchase three of them.

November finally arrived, and I moved to Gaza, ready to get to work. By then I had gotten through forty lessons in Mr. Irany's textbook. One lesson included the Arabic verb for "surrender," and I did so happily, having learned perhaps as much conversational Arabic from Jarrell and Shirley as from our esteemed teacher. I could recognize only two or three printed words. The 62-mile drive from Bethlehem passed through Hebron on the West Bank and Be'er Sheva in Israel's Negev Desert before halting at Gaza's eastern-border checkpoint. After inspecting our U.S. passports, an Israeli soldier waved us through.

## **November and December 1970**

Living in a foreign culture is, of course, not the same as visiting a foreign country. And Gaza, almost entirely traditional Sunni Muslim and under military occupation, couldn't have been more foreign. Neighboring Israel was the twentieth-century; it pulsed with energy. In Gaza, one negotiated a cultural tightrope stretched precariously between then and now. Closer to *then*, which was centuries ago. There were rules I needed to keep in mind; fewer for men than for women, but rules were rules. The most obvious prohibited my being alone with a young woman and particularly a young Arab woman. The



others mostly dealt with safety:

- I was to memorize my passport number (K510103) and never ever leave the compound without the passport. It was the only identification that mattered.
- There would always be the potential of grave danger anywhere outside the compound. Wherever I went, I stood out like a flashing neon sign and could be mistaken for an Israeli. (Not that there was even one neon sign, much less a traffic light, there.) I was warned against exploring the city on foot, unless accompanied by a trusted Arab. The refugee camps were absolutely off limits. In those days, few Gazans spoke or understood English well, and I had no confidence in my Arabic, so the urge to explore was put to rest.
- If I heard gunfire, I should immediately drop to the ground or floor.
- In Gaza, I was to say that I worked at *al moustashfa mamdani*; in Israel, it was *bet holim habaptisteam*. My rudimentary Hebrew should never be spoken in Gaza. And forget about traveling to Egypt, Jordan or Lebanon; the Hebrew entry stamp in my passport made that impossible.
- Care should be exercised in photographing people one wasn't acquainted with, particularly conservative Muslims, and anything military. Islam forbade the representation of people and animals in its art, and this had been extended to include photography. (I would learn that young Muslims liked to be photographed.)
- Despite the hot, humid summers, wearing short pants was forbidden except around the apartment, at the beach or when playing sports.
- I was to do my own cooking, and my experience in the kitchen was next to none. It would not be safe to shop for food in the *souk* right across the street from the compound. Meats, fruit, vegetables and soft drinks could be ordered through the hospital business office. It was essential that drinking water be boiled and all produce carefully washed with powdered laundry detergent, then well rinsed before being consumed.
- The hospital had been bombed and struck by mortar fire during the Six Day War, and there was always the possibility that another war would break out. That possibility was discussed so often that it seemed inevitable. I was advised to be ready to quickly pack necessities in the event that we were forced to flee. And it was said that, for some obtuse diplomatic reason, our safety remained the responsibility of the U.S. embassy in faraway Cairo, not the one in Tel Aviv.

My upstairs apartment was one of two on the back side of the compound, isolated from the other residences. (The adjacent apartment was used for guests of the mission and summer volunteers, and rarely occupied.) The bedroom opened onto a large rooftop terrace overlooking the church, clinic and lab on one side and on the other, the ruin of a house, probably never rebuilt after the first world war, in the Zaytoun District. This was Gaza's densely peopled Old City, with its web of alley streets. (*Zaytoun* is translated "olive trees," which were long gone.) Nearby stood the towering minaret of the 600-year-old Katib al-Wilaya Mosque. The freshly renovated apartment couldn't have been nicer. It consisted of a large room with modern kitchen appliances and woven-wicker furniture, a bedroom and a western-style bathroom. Twelve-foot ceilings helped moderate the summer heat. In readying the apartment, Anne Nicholas had overseen the building of a magnificent desk by the hospital carpenters. With shelves above, it filled a niche in the main room, and I loved it. In the bathroom, there was an Italian-made washing machine that washed pretty well and wrinkled even better, but the apartment came with an ironing board and electric iron.

The library where I would work was a repurposed house on Omar al-Mukhtar Street, the city's primary thoroughfare, just around the corner from the Nicholas home. Like the more modern Gaza residences of the Rimal District, it was surrounded by a high wall. Anne was kept busy home-schooling her youngest daughter, so Lily, a westernized Christian Arab who was fluent in English and very personable, had been

employed at the library. We got along easily. She took charge of the front desk, while I sorted through boxes of used books donated by church members in the U.S., and painted cataloging information on the spines of those that seemed of any use. The donated books gradually began to fill the empty shelves, which was about all they were good for. Most were musty, obscure novels from the forties and fifties. Donations were like that: A church group had once sent the mission a box filled with used tea bags... There were some paperbacks in Arabic, presumably Christian books, but I couldn't tell one from another. Not that it mattered—hardly anyone ever visited the library, much less borrowed a book. I turned a stairwell into a music listening room equipped with an old record player the Nicholas children had outgrown. The three or four LPs of semiclassical music sat silent. Lily and I arrived one day to find a notice posted on the outside wall warning that women wearing minidresses and men in bell-bottomed pants were at risk of being doused with acid. Her skirts weren't *that* short and my pant legs were technically only flared, so we laughed it off.

Thanks to Jarrell's patience, I'd finally mastered the manual transmission and was able to take over some of Ed's driving chores. He took me to Tel Aviv, about fifty miles to the north, and demonstrated how to deliver specimens to an Israeli hospital lab and clear shipments through customs. Postal service was more reliable and secure in Israel than in Gaza, so six afternoons each week, I drove to Ashkelon, where our mail arrived at Post Office Box 44. The postal clerk was a no-nonsense Israeli woman who spoke only Hebrew and French. My command of Hebrew was very limited, but at last I could put three years of high school French to use. The carpenter shop had built a locking cabinet with pigeon holes in which I sorted the mail. Everyone in the Mission Family was starved for letters, packages, magazines and newspapers from home, and being the postman automatically put me on their good side. I took pleasure in filling those slots each day. On Sundays, I attended the two church services, but would eventually follow the lead of Glynda and Judy, and forego the Arabic preaching. Most nights, I picked out tunes on my guitar, read, wrote letters, worked on an ink drawing or ironed shirts while listening to the radio or my Simon & Garfunkel and Peter, Paul & Mary cassettes. A part of me had always felt alone, but I had never experienced genuine loneliness until then. Alone and lonely are not the same. It seemed that this was to be my life in Gaza.

Few Gazans owned automobiles, in part because the Israeli duty on imported vehicles was nearly 100% of the auto's cost. As a result, the relatively few cars one saw on the streets predated the occupation and people relied on taxis and buses. I was to travel to and from the library by *service* (sehr-VEECE), which were Mercedes sedans that each carried as many passengers as it could possibly hold from Palestine Square straight down Omar al-Mukhtar St. to the sea and back. Palestine Square was an open area that served as the town's transit hub. A mounted policeman oversaw the languid flow of autos, busses, taxis and donkey carts, which always yielded to military vehicles. Anne instructed me to walk across the square and locate a *service* that was loading, climb in, hand the driver the cheap fare and simply say *al jundi*, Arabic for "the soldier." He would know to let me out at the beheaded statue of a Palestinian soldier lying in defeat in an abandoned square across the street from the library. It sounded simple, except my looks and those words seemed to strike fear in the driver and other passengers. After a few weeks of trauma and drama, I was allowed to use the Bug.

As for entertainment, the Mission had a group membership at the United Nations Beach Club, a very modest sort of social center for the small UNRWA leadership staff of mostly world-weary, hard-drinking, middle-aged British men straight out of a Graham Greene novel. There were more of us than them, and our dues probably kept the club afloat. It offered nothing more than a couple of changing rooms for swimmers, an outdoor shower, a bar that served serious alcohol (the only such beverages sold in the Gaza Strip), soft drinks and gristly steak sandwiches (which would've been the only food on the menu, had there been a menu) and a room where an old movie was projected by Ed most Saturday nights. This was better than nothing, and none of us complained about the sandwiches or the B-movies. I would come to appreciate

“better than nothing,” which is always at least something.

Gaza’s Mediterranean shoreline is blessed with a sandy beach far better than most of those along Israel’s rocky coast to the north. Except for the private Beach Club, there was no facility that catered to its recreational use. It was often deserted, except for boys and commercial fishermen. As there were no piers for docking, the rustic old fishing boats were pushed and pulled up onto the beach. None was motor powered, so it took strong men to make a living from the sea. Young men and boys sometimes swam in the calm surf or navigated it standing on a *hassaka*, a sort of surfboard guided by a long oar with a paddle on either end. Most adults simply strolled the beach, while young children played in the sand and shallow water. Arab women were a rare sight there and always modestly clothed. The beach club’s women patrons who went for a swim were subjected to the leers of Arab men and didn’t last long in the water before retreating to the club’s terrace.

The population of the Gaza Strip had swelled to about 400,000 by 1970. (*Fifty years later, it is two million.*) Fewer than two percent were Christians—Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and the handful who’d joined the little Baptist church and been baptized. Most of the Christians were Gaza natives who lived comfortably in the Zaytoun District behind the compound. A hidden doorway near the church was unlocked, admitting them to the compound whenever there was a service or activity. Ed Nicholas shared the pulpit with Hannah Ibrahim, an uppity Egyptian-born minister whose Sunday morning sermon was in Arabic and, judging from the sound of it, on the bombastic side. Ed Nicholas preached the evening service in soft-spoken English with intelligence and humility, and it was the one occasion each week when the entire Mission Family came together.

The church’s American-style youth activities, overseen by Anne, had attracted a couple dozen Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic teenagers, and I was to assist her, beginning with the production of a Christmas play. Most of these kids spoke English and were drawn to our Western ways. The young women were far less inhibited than their Muslim counterparts; they took pride in their hairstyles and sometimes wore dangerously short skirts. Their families descended from Gaza’s earliest Christians, and as property owners and merchants, they occupied a unique socio-economic stratum. This enabled the sons and some of the daughters to pursue a college education in North America. Very few returned.

My first experience with the youth group was a day trip to northern Israel. It was an escape from the narrow flatland of the Gaza Strip to the mountains and beautiful vistas of the Upper Galilee in the West Bank. Anne, Judy, Mrs. McGlamery and I went along as chaperones. They would lead the way in one of the mission autos while I was stationed in the old school bus that followed it, enabling me to get to know the young people. Off we went, the liberated kids laughing and flirting and passing snacks around. In no time the floor was littered with the shells of salted sunflower seeds. Whoever planned the route hadn’t taken into consideration the bus driver’s inexperience on narrow mountain roads. For the screaming kids, it was a roller coaster ride. When the bus lurched through a steep, hairpin curve, my head struck a window hard enough to break through it. I was dazed, but no one seemed to care.

I had easily gotten acquainted with several of the Christian young men: Jabra, Emmanuel, Anton and Marwan. The terrace of my apartment was adjacent to Marwan’s family’s rooftop, where his mother hung their laundry to dry. He was to start college in the States in the summer, and we often chatted over the low separating wall. The indisputable leader of the group was older than the others, hardly any younger than I. He’d helped Anne set up the library and had always worked closely with her in organizing the youth activities. He seemed to presume that I was there to replace him and was surprisingly unfriendly right from the

start, resisting every effort I made. Alienating him could easily undo Anne's youth program, so I stepped back. My failure to assert myself as a leader or establish any sort of friendship with this fellow doomed whatever role Anne expected me to play in the church.



*The Baptist Village, Petah Tiqva, Israel*

The Baptist missions to Israel and Gaza existed apart from one another. Our relationship was friendly and cooperative, even though our political leanings were sometimes at odds. I had a brief history with the Baptist Convention of Israel, having worked as a summer camp counselor at the Baptist Village outside Petah Tiqva a year earlier. I looked forward to visiting some of the people I'd gotten acquainted with there. From the evening I arrived, Anne had, however subtly, made it clear that I wasn't returning to Israel. Our address was "Gaza *via* Israel," not "Gaza, Israel."

Mac Powers was the new Journeyman assigned to teach and coach sports at the Baptist Village's boarding school. After the 1947 war, Baptist missionaries established a home and school for a dozen orphaned Arab children in the countryside near Petah Tiqva. When they reached adulthood, the orphanage became a vocational boarding school with an emphasis on agriculture. This was the Baptist Village, or as we called it "the farm." Mac had graduated in prelaw from the College of William & Mary in Virginia. We were already friends, having worked together in the summer camps and then gotten through training as dormitory suitemates. As we settled in, Mac and I corresponded by mail until we finally got together in early December. The school was making a weekend bus trip to Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba in the southern Negev Desert, and he invited me to accompany them. Most of the students were from Arab Christian villages that had not evacuated during the 1947 war. These villagers had assimilated as Israeli Arabs, and their children grew up speaking Hebrew almost as fluently as Arabic. The contrast between these jolly young men and the repressed teenagers at the church in Gaza couldn't have been more pronounced.

An autumn day arrives in Gaza when men and boys, as if by order, begin wearing sweaters. Gaza's winters were mild outdoors, but chilly inside. My apartment, with its thick concrete walls, cement tile floor and high ceilings, stayed passably pleasant in summer, but frigid in winter. If one's home had a source of warmth, it was a *geezer*. These cantankerous kerosene-fueled heaters had only one advantage: They were portable. My geezer moved with me from room to room and helped only a little. Tap water was heated by a rooftop solar device, which seemed innovative most of the year, but less so on winter mornings.

This was my first holiday season away from family and friends. By then, B.J. Marshall and Jean Dickman had returned from their furloughs, and the Mission Family was complete. We gathered at the Beach Club for a traditional Thanksgiving feast. A Quaker woman who worked as a social worker for one of the welfare agencies (the only other American in the Gaza Strip) and two Al-Shifa Hospital nurses from the Netherlands, Diddie and Dinnie, joined us. Someone had returned from furlough with cans of cranberry sauce and other ingredients, and our turkey dinner was scarcely different from the one my mother would be serving in Birmingham seven hours later. That was the day I first began to feel like a member of the Mission Family.

Fitting in takes time. Each of the four families, three of whom included children, was a fairly independent unit. That left the eight of us who were single on our own. Glynda and Judy lived together and



were always regarded, like it or not, as a set; others had shared enough years to establish strong friendships. As the odd fellow, I appreciated the various ways the women included me. It started with Mavis welcoming Jean's return by cooking an amazing Pakistani curry dinner with homemade chutney, served on the hospital roof one starry night. I had never tasted anything like it. B.J. Marshall would later invite some of us for a Japanese meal. Dressed in a kimono, she taught us a few Japanese phrases while we struggled with the chopsticks. With Christmas approaching, I wrote a play for the youth group to perform. It was based on an English translation of the Russian writer Alexander Pushkin's version of the nativity story. I shaped it into a script and had it translated into Arabic. Biblical costuming was easy in that part of the world, and had the script called for a donkey, sheep or camels, we wouldn't have had to look far. I could only assume the translation was faithful and that the cast recited their lines perfectly.

The U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv provided fresh-cut Christmas trees to Americans living in Israel, and we were included. They were free, so I requested one. Not having decorations, I ordered a sack of the tiniest possible lemons from the *souk* and attached them to its limbs. It was beautiful. The midnight Christmas Eve celebration in Bethlehem marks the beginning of the holiday worldwide. Mavis, Ann Dwyer and Jean invited me to attend with them. Shirley Peach prepared a hearty supper, and then we huddled together for hours in crowded Manger Square waiting for the program to begin. Their companionship that freezing cold night remains more memorable than the choral music and scripture reading. Small gifts were exchanged, and Mavis gave me a leather belt with a handsome buckle. I don't recall having purchased a present for anyone... A package from home brought the latest in menswear: a pair of woven polyester pants, uncuffed and flared. They looked sharp and, even better, defied wrinkling in my washing machine.

### Sights and Sounds

I was all eyes and ears wherever I went in this new-to-me world, and I wanted to remember everything I saw. My parents had given me a grown-up 35-mm camera as a graduation present, and I carried it almost everywhere I went. We had been advised that purchasing film and processing color slides overseas could be unpredictable, so I'd packed plenty of film. Prepaid mailers allowed me to send the rolls to the States, where they would be developed and delivered to my home address in Birmingham. Only after my return to the States would I know how well the camera was performing.

Gaza City could've been mistaken for almost any third-world town except for the skyline of minarets and the traditional clothing most adults wore. Young men and children dressed Western-style, but the older Muslim men, their wives and young women dressed as they had for centuries. The men wore a *jellabiya*, which was like an ankle-length nightshirt, and the traditional Arab headdress called a *kaffiyeh*, consisting of a *hata*, a large square cloth folded into a triangle, and an *egel*, the coil of thick black cord that held it in place. The women's long dresses, *thobes*, skimmed the ground and revealed only their hands. *Thobes* were usually black, and their elaborate embroidery or woven stripes identified the wearer's native village. A long white cotton scarf concealed their hair and flowed down the back. Faces were rarely veiled, although the more modest women sometimes held the scarf over their mouth. The women had amazing posture, which allowed them to balance a basket, bundle or ceramic pot atop their heads while they walked long distances. This freed their hands to hold an infant or tend to their small children. And there was an abundance of children.

This traditional Islamic society was a man's world. They greeted each other with a handshake and often stood holding hands as they talked, sometimes for minutes at a time. As a gesture of respect or affection, the handshake might be followed by one of them touching his hand to his heart. Young boys were taught

to ceremoniously take an older man's hand, kiss it, then lift it to their forehead. Seeing two young men walking hand in hand was not unusual. Whenever one saw a man and woman walking together, she was always a few steps behind, burdened with a basket or parcel while he remained empty handed. At family meals, the fathers and older sons were served first, leaving what remained for the women and younger children's second seating. Women worked tirelessly, never seeming to question their subservient status.

To the Israeli military, every able-bodied Arab male was possibly a terrorist. Foot patrols of soldiers walked the sidewalks and randomly stopped men and teenaged boys, demanding their required papers of identification, sometimes frisking them, sometimes arresting them. There were an unusually large number of blind people in Gaza, and blind men wore a particular white turban with a red top. One day I watched a jeep halt on Omar al-Mukhtar St., a soldier hop out and lead an elderly blind man across the busy street. He probably had no idea who was helping him. It wasn't military procedure, but a momentary act of kindness.

The rarity of forests in Palestine meant that from ancient times buildings were primarily constructed of stone and later concrete. Without sturdy wooden beams to support a roof, the ceilings of older structures were vaulted and domed. The heart of Gaza City, the "old town" just outside the compound, was a hodgepodge of these centuries-old stone buildings with arched doorways and windows with iron grillwork amid more recent flat-roofed, reinforced concrete structures of no distinction. Construction had halted after the Six Day War, and the tops of many buildings were cluttered with rebar and posts where another floor or two was to have been added. This was the Zaytoun District. Within it, the Greek Orthodox St. Porphyrius Church had been founded in the fifth century and "modernized" by Crusaders in the 1150s. The Katib al-Wilaya Mosque, right next door, had been constructed in the ninth century. Both were hardly more than a stone's throw from my apartment, but only the mosque's minaret and the church's rooftop cross were visible. Owing to the warnings not to venture from the compound on foot, I never laid eyes on either building. There was no telling what wonders lay buried beneath this area of Gaza City, but it was so densely built that an archaeological dig would've been impossible. No one seemed interested in the ancient past anyway.

Some refugees lived in the city, but most remained in the camps. In 1948, they had sheltered in large communities of tents in barren areas of the surrounding countryside. These eventually became eight camps, each one housing tens of thousands, all supported by UNRWA. Its food distribution centers provided each refugee family a monthly allotment of rice, cooking oil, flour, tinned meat and powdered milk. When I arrived two decades later, the camps were still without electricity, sewers and paved roads. Over time, the refugees had built crude cinder-block houses to replace the fragile tents. For roofing, thin corrugated sheets of an asbestos material were laid across the walls and weighted in place by cinder blocks or stones. Each house was entered through a walled courtyard and consisted of two to four rooms with a cement floor. There was little in the way of furniture; thin cotton mattresses were stacked against a wall during the daytime. Except in the rainy winter months, families took their meals in their paved courtyard. Groups of families shared a central latrine and outdoor faucet. In every home, porous ceramic jugs held their drinking water; the evaporation of water sweated from the low-fired clay kept the contents cool. Kerosene stoves were used for cooking and heating, and the hospital routinely cared for children who'd been severely burned by them. There was nothing attractive about these sprawling, extremely crowded communities. No trees, no flowers, hardly anything green. They appeared to be slums, but they were by no means squalid. The residents had lost everything but their dignity, refusing to yield their traditional way of living. Women hauled water from the communal faucets, cooked their native

dishes and saw that everyone and their clothing were clean. The men mainly toiled as laborers, working hard to earn enough to purchase fresh produce, meat and other necessities, and their children attended the UNRWA schools. Literacy in the camps was very high. I hadn't learned to read and write Arabic, but young Palestinian children did.

The antennas that rose high from rooftops in Gaza City were mostly for radio, tuned to Egyptian and Jordanian stations. There were very few television sets and none among the Mission Family until the Moores and Peaches imported tiny black-and-white SONYs from Hong Kong. The little transistor radios that men carried in hand filled the air with traditional Middle Eastern music. The favorite pop singers were Fariid and Uum Kulthum—it didn't matter that Uum Kulthum was a woman in her seventies. At first light each morning, I awoke to the call to prayer from the nearby mosque. The moment the muezzin could distinguish the difference between a black thread and a white thread, he tapped his microphone a couple of times before fervently singing out variations of *Allah hu akbar* amplified by loudspeakers. His call was echoed from mosques across the city and throughout the Gaza Strip. (I sometimes sang it in the shower.) That occurred five times each day. I would come to relish the cry of the call to prayer and the instrumentation, rhythms and dissonant keys of Arab music. They were the background sound track of daily life.

The ringing of a telephone was the rarest sound. There were so few in Gaza that the hospital's phone number was simply 40. Calls entered the compound through an old-fashioned switchboard manned by Ghanim, a sad-eyed young man. As a boy, he had fallen under a moving train and lost an arm and a leg. He was brought to the hospital and never left. His English was good, helped no doubt by his listening in on the mission phone calls, and he'd become amazingly mobile on his single crutch. Late at night when his workday was done, I listened for him hobbling below my apartment, then up the steep stairs to the room where he and the male nurses slept. If anyone knew everything that was going on in the compound, it was Ghanim, and he probably shared a lot of it with the boys. The hospital had another permanent resident: a sweet, very elderly lady named Sitt Huda. (*Sitt* is translated "grandmother.") She was totally blind and spent her days helping in the sewing room. She walked ever so slowly, clutching the arm of whoever happened to be headed in her direction, and never missed a church service. No one could say how long Sitt Huda had been there; she was just there and would always be there.

Artists and craftsmen were few in Gaza. A pottery produced traditional wares: the clay water jugs found in every home as well as the goblet-shaped *darbuka* drums finished with a thin circle of goatskin tightly stretched and laced over the top. And there were basket weavers, whose work was almost unintentionally of beauty. On a sidewalk midway between the compound and library, men fashioned the wicker chairs and tables that furnished my apartment; a lot of their work was destined for sidewalk cafés in Tel Aviv. Nihad Sabassi was the only self-declared artist I was aware of. He owned a photo studio and also painted, and the Mission Family kept him busy with orders for oil paintings copied from Holy Land postcards. The artistry that touched every adult Arab's life was jewelry. Gold bracelets were stacked on the wrists of every married woman, rich or poor. She'd received the first of them as part of her wedding dowry, and others were added over the years. Her jewelry represented the family's savings. The 15th-century Gold Market occupied a narrow passageway with a vaulted ceiling adjacent to the Great Mosque. Most of the shops had been owned by Christian families for generations. I saw exquisite examples of the goldsmiths' work, but never laid eyes on the Gold Market or Great Mosque. The most extraordinary artistry was in the refugee women's intricate needlework. When Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the U.N., visited Gaza in 1958, he was presented with table linens embroidered with a unique pattern of doves of peace in the blue color of the U.N. flag. Ruth Dayan, the estranged wife of Israel's defense minister, had started a cooperative in Gaza for

marketing Palestinian embroidery to European fashion houses, but no outlet sold their beautiful work in the city. Finally, there was Abdel Wahib, who owned a dhurrie rug workshop. I drove past it en route to Ashkelon and occasionally stopped to watch his helpers working at the enormous looms. As soon as I walked in, Abdel Wahib would send a young boy out for a carafe of thick, bitter coffee, saying “I know how much you like coffee, Mr. Robert.” In fact, I wasn’t a coffee drinker at all, but savored the dark aroma and would slowly sip from the tiny china cup down to its muddy bottom while Abdel Wahib chatted and his fingers fidgeted with the string of worry beads he always carried.

## Jerusalem

In the Six Day War, Israel had taken Jordan’s territory on the western side of the Jordan River. This is the West Bank. East Jerusalem’s ancient, walled Old City was the “jewel in the crown.” Unlike the other occupied territories, there were few restrictions on travel throughout the West Bank. Israel had no intention of relinquishing it and had begun its annexation by building settlements on land owned by Palestinian families for centuries. Jerusalem is sixty miles from Gaza, and none of us ever passed up a day trip or weekend getaway there. The mission rented an apartment on the outskirts, in Beit Jala, a hillside Arab-Christian town that overlooked Bethlehem. Mavis had lived there while studying with Mr. Irany, and we continued to use it for weekend getaways.

West Jerusalem was entirely Jewish and merged almost seamlessly with East Jerusalem. It was mostly modern, with a large department store, an American-style supermarket that even sold Kellogg’s cereals, Steimatzky’s bookstore and plenty of falafel cafés. The five or six cinemas showed the latest American movies, subtitled in Hebrew and Arabic. That’s where I saw *Fiddler on the Roof* soon after its release. East Jerusalem was entirely different, Arab for the most part and of another era. I never tired of exploring the maze of narrow pedestrian streets that crisscrossed the Old City, the exotic aroma of spice shops sweetening the air. The holy sites drew Christians, Muslims and Jews, and I routinely stopped at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with its suffocating incense and maddening cacophony of praise; the stark, massive Western Wall, where Orthodox Jews stood swaying and bobbing their heads in prayer; and the tranquil Temple Mount with its gleaming Dome of the Rock shrine. There were Israelis who longed to demolish it, but to my eyes, it was a perfect piece of architecture. I was no longer there as a tourist or a pilgrim, but as an observer savoring the growing familiarity with those places. There were plenty of shops that catered to tourists, but on a less traveled street, I was drawn to one filled with antiques and antiquities, where over time I purchased several treasures. Ann Dwyer, having served in Jordan before the Six Day War, knew the Old City better than anyone. She once took several of us to a Polish convent that offered lunch. Only Ann would’ve known of such a secret place, where she knocked on the unmarked door and said, “Sister, we’ve come for lunch” to the nun who silently ushered us in. A satisfying bowl of warm, watery soup, bread and tea cost something like two Israeli pounds (seventy cents). Near the bus station outside the Damascus Gate, a café served delicious lamb shawarma sandwiches and hummus. It was fast food, and about the only Arab cuisine I ate with any regularity.

In those days, there was limited concern for security in the Old City. I once came face to face with Moshe Dayan. As he approached with his security detail, there was just enough time to raise my camera and snap the shutter before one of his aides turned to me and said something like “Stay here. I’ll be back for your film.” I obediently waited a few minutes, he didn’t return, and Dayan was out of focus anyway.



## Winter 1971

Everyone in the mission tended to keep to themselves that cold, rainy winter. Correspondence proved to be the best defense against loneliness. In those days, people wrote and promptly answered letters, and never a week went by without hearing from my mother, a friend or two from Auburn, or a fellow Journeyman in some other corner of the world. One of my college friends faithfully clipped and mailed each week's *Peanuts* cartoons from a daily newspaper.

No newspaper was published in Gaza, and people relied on the Arabic *Al-Quds* and English *Jerusalem Post* for news of what was happening all around us. Terrorist activity had surged, and hardly a day passed without a report in the *Jerusalem Post* of a violent attack and several deaths in Gaza City. Then one day, an article was headlined "Rain in Gaza Falls on Empty Streets" after "a spate of grenade attacks" resulted in the closure of shops and schools. But the quiet lasted only a few days before it was terrorism as usual. Policing the crowded refugee camps was nearly impossible, so the army had begun bulldozing hundreds of houses to create grids of wide roads through them and around their perimeters. The curfew moved to sunset, which came just after 4:30 in winter, canceling movie nights at the Beach Club. (In the more troublesome refugee camps, curfews were sometimes extended to twenty-four hours, leaving the hospital short staffed.) My feeling of isolation was only heightened by the cold and damp.

Mavis, Ann and Jean seemed to enjoy my company and occasionally invited me for what they called Gaza Pizza: a piece of *khubz* (the flatbread called *pita* in Israel) sliced through to create two disks, each slathered with tomato paste, then sprinkled with olive oil, topped with grated Dutch cheese and baked in a toaster oven. If one forgot they'd ever tasted a real pizza, Gaza Pizza was quite the treat, way better than nothing. Whenever we were together, the conversation inevitably veered to their various work-related complaints, like Dr. Hatem's habit of arriving late for surgery. Misery does love company, and we made a game of complaining, which we called "Ain't It Awful."

Jarrell and Merrill had established a strong friendship and were making plans to join an overland expedition to St. Catherine's Monastery deep in the Sinai Peninsula. It was built in the 550s at the foot of Mt. Sinai, where Moses is thought to have received the Ten Commandments. Within the monastery walls, one could even view a descendent of the original burning bush... Getting there meant trucking more than 200 miles through nothing but desert; then there was Mt. Sinai to climb. They invited me to join them, but the cost was prohibitive. And I was saving my vacation days and allowance for a trip to East Africa.

The Moores occasionally asked me over to watch television. Israel's state-owned station had been broadcasting in black and white for three years. The programming, mostly in Hebrew, was dismal, and for some unimaginable reason, the American bachelor-father sitcom *Family Affair* was popular with the Israelis. Better than nothing... One evening, we were watching when Merrill was called away to deliver a baby. Refugee children were born at home unless there were complications. He invited me to come along. Wearing a gown, cap and mask, I stood some distance to the side while he turned the breech baby with forceps and the young mother screamed. When I regained consciousness, lying on the O.R. floor after a full-forward faint into a metal cabinet, the newborn was crying. I gave it another try a month or so later and witnessed the miracle of birth fully conscious and would later endure the less inspiring removal of a gall bladder.

Otherwise, my duties never intersected with the hospital, and I kept a distance. My apartment faced the upstairs rooms above the carpenter shop where the male nurses changed into their uniforms and those on evening and night shifts slept, so they were constantly passing my doorway. One of the graduate nurses,

Shehada, and a couple of the third-year students had introduced themselves and occasionally stopped by to get better acquainted. Aside from talk about what they called “our situation,” meaning the loss of their homeland and the occupation, the conversation usually dealt with comparing their culture and Muslim beliefs with our American ways and Christian doctrine. Rather than argue religion, we looked for the beliefs we shared. One thing I learned: They weren’t interested in proselytizing their faith; authentic Islam advocates tolerance of Christianity and Judaism.

After four months in the Gaza Strip, all I’d seen of it were the compound, the library and the beach club. Shehada suggested we drive to the southern border, and it was like discovering another world. That made him my first “trusted Arab.” He was engaged to be married to a young woman he’d met in the nursing school, a girl with whom he’d hardly ever been unchaperoned. This was unusual only because most marriages were arranged by the parents, sometimes from childhood and often between cousins. His family had begun gathering the gold jewelry that was required as a dowry. The dowry was serious business, whether a couple was Muslim or Christian. Our casual friendship seemed to indicate to the other male nurses and students that I was approachable, but except to say *sabah al-khayr* (“good morning”) or *masa’ al-khayr* (good afternoon), they kept a sort of bashful distance. That changed when B.J. asked me to teach the nursing math class. It was just basic algebra, and, after all, *al-jabr* had been invented by the Arabs. I already had some experience with teaching high school math in Auburn, so it felt right, right from the start—and it took me away from the library for an hour or so each afternoon. (B.J. would later have me teach a first-aid lesson in mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, following an instruction manual and using a mannequin. That was a challenge.)

Cooking continued to be a problem. Shafik, a pleasant young fellow from the hospital kitchen, cooked for Glynda and Judy, but no arrangements had been made for keeping me fed. I did have the advantage and convenience of regularly shopping at the tiny supermarket in Ashkelon. It primarily sold canned and packaged foods and a little of everything else, although only one brand of anything—like a decent mayonnaise, an oily peanut butter, wonderful dark chocolate bars, Dutch cheese, pasteurized milk packaged in plastic bags and *challah*, the plaited loaves of sweet sabbath bread available only on Fridays. (Frozen foods were still a rarity in Israel.) I resisted ordering much more than Coca-Colas and fruit from the Gaza *souk*. Having never been there, I had no idea what was available, and without a cookbook, I was at a loss to cook anything from scratch except fried foods. Anne finally hired Mr. Abed to regularly come in and prepare something while I was at the library. Mr. Abed, a tiny, timid man, cooked and cleaned for Mavis and spoke limited English. Assembling ingredients for him to cook was beyond me, except to order a roast from the *souk*. So, given next to no direction, he usually made his specialty: perfectly conical, lightly browned coconut macaroons. They were beautiful, but after coming home to dozens of them time after time, I let him go. Man cannot live on macaroons alone. Anne also hired a Christian widow to iron my laundry. She spoke no English and, dressed entirely in black, was about the saddest person I’d ever seen. Domestic help wasn’t for me; I could iron my own shirts.

## Spring 1971

Then Mrs. McGlamery was enlisted to feed me lunch on the weekdays. She brought out the good china, and the two of us dined on an approximation of Southern food cooked by Amna and served at one end of the long mahogany dining table. Mrs. McGlamery preferred to do all the talking, and I got a kick out of her monologues, although they inevitably disparaged the Arabs. She was perhaps the member of the Mission Family most dedicated to turning them into Baptists. In no time, she began giving me shopping lists for the Ashkelon supermarket. In exchange for her feeding me, I had become her “boy.” After I mentioned my

mother's upcoming June visit, she made a list of cosmetics she needed from the States—the sorts of things churches wouldn't think to collect for missionaries.

My most memorable encounter with Mrs. McGlamery: The monthly mission meeting rotated from one mission home to another. I hadn't been there long before, suddenly, it was my turn to host it. That meant serving a dessert. Shirley Peach saved the day by baking a cobbler—a peach cobbler. The McGlamerys were the first to arrive. She walked into the apartment, quickly surveyed it and asked, "Where are your *nuts*?" What nuts? Then she was on the phone: "Amna, bring that bowl of cashews to Mr. Roberts's apartment!"

Someone in the Mission Family had received a copy of *Stranger Than Science*, a paperback that was passed around until we'd all had a go at it. It was just believe-it-or-not trivia, but when one is hungry for stimulation, who cares? Steimatzky's Book Shop in West Jerusalem fed me better with *The Complete Stories of Mark Twain*, Ross Macdonald detective novels, *The Ugly American* and whatever British editions of U.S. bestsellers I could get my hands on, like *Love Story* and *The Godfather*. I made a note of Dickens's opening passage in *David Copperfield*: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." There was time enough to read the Bible from cover to cover, but it never occurred to me to give it a try.

Each of us was occasionally responsible for the early-morning chapel service for an entire week. That meant delivering five devotionals, pausing at the end of each sentence for the translator to repeat it in Arabic. I was no preacher, but this wasn't the time or place for theology, so whenever my turn came around, I stuck to simple parables and whatever I remembered from sermons that impressed me as a boy. There was one about the sinking of the unsinkable *Titanic*. I don't believe Ed was pleased with my efforts.

Another family had been appointed to the mission: Ken and Lenore Mullican arrived from Oklahoma with their toddler son and infant daughter. Ken was a microbiologist; following language study in Bethlehem, he would take charge of Judy's lab and blood bank. Lenore was a nurse and had grown up in Jerusalem, where her parents were long-time missionaries. Both were in their mid-twenties, eager to get started, and I quickly warmed to them. I was no longer the new guy, but still the youngest.

There had been no opportunity to visit the farm at Petah Tiqva until mid April when Ava Nell and B.J. ordered tickets for an Israel Philharmonic concert in Tel Aviv: Leonard Bernstein conducting Mahler's Third Symphony. The five or six of us would spend the night at the Village. Even if the concert hadn't been extraordinary with Bernstein's acrobatic baton-wielding, it was joyful enough just to sit in that modern concert hall, in that lively city, a world away from Gaza. And as a bonus, our \$3.00 seats were eight rows directly behind Golda Meir and Abba Eban, Israel's prime minister and foreign minister. Early, early the next morning, as we were making a quick getaway, the missionary agriculturist's wife, showed us their litter of puppies and asked if any of us wanted one. Without hesitating, Mavis and I each grabbed a pup.

I named my female puppy Dilbert; Mavis's male was Jacques. They were sired by a Doberman and a Scottie, and turned out to be little black terriers. Dilbert couldn't have made a sweeter companion. The Arabs had little appreciation of household pets, and Dilbert seemed to have an inborn resistance to Arabs. If an Arab held her, she trembled; if she got loose in the compound, she ran barking through the crowd of out-patients. Because of the puppies, Mavis and I began spending more time together. One day, we were walking in the compound with the puppies in our arms when we happened upon Lily from the library. She liked dogs and asked their names. When Mavis introduced Jacques, Lily said, "Jacques? What kind of name is that for a dog?" I suppose *Dilbert* sounded more canine than human. Another afternoon, as we drove to Ashkelon

for their vaccinations, Mavis unloaded her pent-up frustrations, confiding how the other single women were paired off, leaving her to herself, feeling utterly alone. No one else had spoken so personally with me. I in turn verbalized for the first time how dissatisfied I was with the solitary nature of my library job and my own loneliness. She went on to say that keeping positive was her biggest challenge, how hard she tried “to say ‘Yes to Life.’” Three words that stayed with me. That conversation, so utterly honest, unveiled our vulnerabilities and brought us closer together. That’s how a lasting friendship can begin.

## The Road

Glynda, Judy and I were fortunate in being assigned the VW Beetle. Truth to tell: No one else wanted it. The two families and five single women who lived in the compound had the use of other, more comfortable vehicles. Glynda and Judy were always generous in sharing the Bug; due to their work schedule and the curfews, they rarely used it. If ever there was an automobile I was drawn to, it is the Beetle. It was a favorite of college students in those days, cheap to buy and operate. Ours was a nondescript older model, with a radio its only frill. Except for the more-than-occasional flat tire, it was reliable. If need be, I could single-handedly push it to the side of the road. There was only one issue with driving it: Vehicles registered in each occupied territory carried a distinguishing license plate and windshield decal. In Israel, the Bug’s silver tag with its bold Hebrew letter *ayin* raised alarm. It wasn’t unusual after parking to return and find a civil defense officer waiting a safe distance from the car. But in Gaza, the local license plate helped ensure our safety.

The mostly straight two lanes of asphalt that ran the entire length of the Gaza Strip were its main roadway. It was but 27 miles of what has been called “one of the world’s oldest and greatest highways, the main route between the earliest known cradles of civilization, the valleys of the Euphrates and of the Nile.” As the mail carrier, I got to know fifteen miles of it well. They took me north to the Erez checkpoint, across the border and on to Ashkelon. (We sometimes exited at the eastern checkpoint when driving to Bethlehem.) Almost daily, I drove through thick orange groves with the Jabalia Refugee Camp just beyond, past the old 7-Up bottling plant, now turning out Gaza Cola, and a threshing floor where a mule walked in a never-ending circle, separating grain from stalks of wheat.

Armed Israeli soldiers manned the busy Erez checkpoint. Thousands of Palestinian men made their living as laborers in Israel and, if they had the correct papers and permits, passed through it twice a day. *Service* taxis parked on the Gaza side, with trucks and vans waiting for workers on the Israeli side. The Bug and I crossed that border often enough that it became a matter of coasting to a halt, waving my passport and getting the nod to proceed. The weekend bus trip to Eilat with Mac and his students had given me a different perspective on the checkpoint. In returning on Sunday afternoon, I was to have been dropped off at the hospital, but we arrived at Erez at dusk and the border was closed. The soldiers couldn’t have been more helpful. They allowed me to telephone the hospital. As I waited in their office for my ride, they joked and played backgammon. The intimidating border guards were just regular guys.

Driving the 20-mile stretch southward from Gaza City, was a rare adventure. Here, motor vehicles slowed for donkey carts, Bedouin herdsman and their goats or sheep, and the occasional camel. Off the main road in a break among citrus groves, I spotted a military cemetery. Row upon row of white markers stood behind a low wall, some chiseled with a cross, some with a Star of David. This was the resting place of more than seven hundred British soldiers who perished in two battles with Egypt in 1917. I hadn’t realized the extent of World War I, and it was surprising that the monuments hadn’t been desecrated. The grounds were green and beautifully kept, unlike anything I’d seen in Gaza outside the hospital compound. I was walking among the gravestones when a young man appeared out of nowhere, smiling. He knew enough English to explain



that his family were employed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission as custodians, then invited me to their home just across the road. There, I met his grandfather, father and brothers, and we sat together, making conversation from their basic English and the little bit of Arabic I'd mastered by then. Tending and protecting those graves had long been the family's mission in life.

The first town to the south is Deir al-Balah, which has been inhabited as long as Gaza City and took its name from an Early Christian monastery and the many thousands of date palms fed by desert springs. It is an oasis. The Israelis had recently purchased farmland nearby with plans to establish a settlement. This was clear evidence that they intended to annex the Gaza Strip and share in the income from the thousands of tons of sweet Jaffa oranges shipped to Europe each year.

Khan Yunis, the next town, originated 700 years before as a *caravanserai* that provided secure lodging for caravans of traders and pilgrims, with stalls for their camels at ground level. At the turn of the 20th century, Khan Yunis was the second largest town in the Gaza District, with a population that in those peaceful Ottoman days included communities of Christians and Jews.

Southward from there, Bedouin communities dotted the increasingly barren landscape. I was intrigued by the *bedou* tribes, who lived in tents and existed just as their ancestors had since the fifth century. They weren't nomadic; the hardscrabble land they lived on was theirs, and they somehow managed to grow enough crops to get by. Without their camels for transportation and plowing, these people wouldn't have lasted long, while their flocks of sheep and goats provided food and wool. The Bedouin are Muslim, and their women more extremely conservative in dress than anyone I saw on the Gaza City streets. The men, however, were welcoming and willing to be photographed; they even gave me a camel ride.

This was as close as Egyptian ground troops had come to striking Israel in the Six Day War, and the roadside remained littered with the rusting, burnt-out carcasses of their trucks and tanks. Rafah is the southernmost town, marking the former border with Egypt, the entryway to the enormous, empty Sinai Peninsula. A couple of times, I crossed the southern border and drove thirty miles to El-Arish, the one Sinai town of any size, where the narrow road veered to the Mediterranean shore. Just beyond it, there was what appeared to be a forest of perfectly spaced palm trees along the pristine beach. My exploring stopped there, but the road continued on, as it had for thousands of years—only 200 miles to Cairo.

Driving in Israel was far more relaxed and always felt safe. There was a freshness and vitality to this highly cultured, very small nation. Free to roam there, I came to know Israel better than the Gaza Strip. Vast, irrigated fields of vegetables seemed to meet the horizon, and in the spring, wildflowers and poppies painted the roadsides, lingering until summer when most of the native vegetation dried to straw. Sometimes a *tel* rose up out of nowhere, marking the site of an ancient city yet to be excavated by archaeologists. At every bus stop, harmless looking Israeli troops, both men and women, were waiting for a ride. Yad Mordechai, the kibbutz just north of the Erez checkpoint had a roadside stand selling flowers from its greenhouses, and I often stopped to purchase a bouquet. After 1948, Yad Mordechai had expanded onto the land of the village of Hiribya. This little town had come under aerial bombardment during the Arab-Israeli War, and its 2,200 Muslims, forty Christians and sixty Jews were forced to evacuate. As the Egyptian army moved north, the Arab villagers fled behind their lines to Gaza. For all the beauty and serenity of Israel's landscape, I couldn't help but imagine villages like Hiribya that had stood here and there 25 years earlier, only to vanish with scarcely a trace.

One Friday, north of Ashkelon, I was struck by the sight of a white horse among the red poppies blooming on the shoulder of the road. This would have been a Kodachrome moment, except the animal had apparently

been struck by a large vehicle and was dead. It lay on its back, its four rigid legs dramatically poised in the air as though it were struggling to right itself—and would remain frozen that way week after week, until the legs finally collapsed. The Israelis, otherwise so fastidious about appearances, never touched it.

## Summer 1971

It was June, and Glynda and Judy were gone. I hardly had time to miss them before my mother and her best friend (my “other mother”) arrived for a week-long visit. There was no keeping Mama away. Six months later, she would visit my brother Mike at the Marine base in California where he was stationed. After a day of meeting the Mission Family and seeing what little there was to see in Gaza, the three of us made a whirlwind tour of Israel. It was a happy week, and they left with assurance that I was in safe hands. Soon after, two medical students, their nurse wives and three student nurses from the States arrived as summer volunteers. One of the college girls kept saying “I got ripped off” and “What a ripoff!” Nine months away from home, and I had no idea what she was talking about. By then, Jarrell and Shirley had completed their Arabic studies and moved into the renovated house near the beach where they would finally be at home.

There was to be a Vacation Bible School, and Anne put me in charge of craft projects for the children. So I scoured Ashkelon for enough popsicle sticks, wooden beads, ribbon, cardboard and contact paper to keep a couple dozen kids busy. Every now and then I felt purposeful. In July, the Christian teenagers spent a week at the summer camp at the farm outside Petah Tiqva. I was their chaperone, and Ava Nell went along as the camp nurse. Two years earlier, I had been one of the gung-ho American college kids who spent the summer there as counselors, so I knew the routine. Being in that familiar outdoor setting again, sleeping in a quonset-hut cabin and renewing ties with the Israel Mission was energizing. But I continued to feel detached from the Gaza kids.

In the weeks that followed, I began thinking more about home. My college friends were marrying and starting careers or grad school, while I had so little to show for the past eleven months. Except for delivering the mail and teaching the math class, I was spinning my wheels, and I knew Anne was disappointed in my failure to engage with the Christian kids. Nothing seemed about to change, and I thought it best to resign. Merrill, then chairman of the mission, suggested that I discuss my options with Bill Marshall, the Mission Board’s field representative for Europe and the Middle East. Bill invited me to spend a couple of days with him and his family at their home in Nicosia on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, about 300 miles off the coast of Syria, and I got a cheap flight there. Bill was young enough to understand my dilemma, and I sensed that he, too, coped with isolation and not being busy enough. He wasn’t sure resignation was the solution and wondered if I could live with giving up. Sometimes it’s best to accept one’s failure and let it be a lesson, but I realized I needed to finish what I’d started and let that be my lesson. He recommended that the mission simply give me more to do and booked passage for me on the S.S. *Appolonia*, a Greek ship that sailed overnight to Haifa in northern Israel. His parting words: “The best is yet to come.”

*I had first arrived in Gaza with two books: my childhood Bible and Markings, Dag Hammarskjöld’s reflective writings. One of my favorite passages goes, “He was a member of the crew on Columbus’s caravel—he kept wondering whether he would get back to his home village in time to succeed the old shoemaker before anyone else could grab the job.” Looking back, that was me: a 24-year-old, too young, shortsighted and self-centered to realize the wonder of this experience.*

Merrill conferred with the Nicholases, Ava Nell and B.J. to revise my job description. The outcome was that Jarrell would replace Anne as my supervisor. I would leave the library, continue to teach nursing math

and also help Shirley and Patty with home-schooling Cari and Melissa in arithmetic. I would still assist Ed by seeing to the mail, delivering lab specimens and dealing with customs as needed. The youngest of the three Nicholas daughters was to join her sisters at the American International School in the fall, and I would pick them up at the dormitory in Herzilya on Friday afternoons and deliver them home for the weekend. And the best assignment: I was directed to dedicate time to making friends with the male nurses and nursing students. Fraternizing with these fellows was something no other member of the Mission Family was in a position to do. Also, Jarrell made it clear that grocery shopping was not among my duties—bad news for Mrs. McGlamery. Except for knowing I had let Anne down, I was happy with the prospect of becoming more useful, acting largely on my own initiative and having ten months to finally get something done.

In late August, the seven summer volunteers left and another Journeyman nurse arrived to replace Glynda. This was Joanna Wright, a cheerful, attractive young woman from Shreveport. With her coal-black hair and dark eyes, she could easily pass for an Arab. Joanna went right to work, without wasting time on language study, and seemed to effortlessly adjust to life in the compound.

### Fall 1971

Starting over. I had the feeling that I'd just arrived.

Shafik was to cook for Joanna, as he had for Glynda and Judy, and Ava Nell proposed that we make it a threesome—a hot lunch in Joanna's apartment in the girls dorm, five days a week. After being distanced from Glynda and Judy, this was an amazing turnabout. All we'd ever needed was Ava Nell to chaperone. The food prepared by the other cooks who worked for the Mission Family tended to be more American than Palestinian, but Shafik's dishes were a delicious compromise. Sitting at the table with Joanna and Ava Nell, while Shafik stirred around in the kitchen, was like being part of a happy little family. Joanna, living without a roommate, was getting acquainted with the girls in the dorm and talked about their teaching her dance movements. And, wonder of wonders, no one objected to my taking her out on the deserted beach road for driving and tire-changing lessons. We became friends in no time.

I was no closer to learning how to cook for myself, and Ava Nell suggested pressure cooking. My mother often used a pressure cooker, but I'd never paid any attention to it. I ordered a roast and some potatoes from the *souk*, and Ava Nell loaned me her cooker. I followed her instructions, but the one thing she neglected to mention was how to remove the lid once the cooking was done. The average fool would've known to first release the steam, but I was a below-average fool. I struggled to turn the lid, just enough before the built-up pressure in the pot launched the lid, roast and potatoes with a loud boom. It was over in a second. The lid grazed my ear as it sailed across the room, ricocheted off the wall and crash landed; the meat and potatoes bounced off the 12-ft. ceiling; and gravy rained all over the kitchen. This would be one of Dilbert's happiest days; she licked the floor and counter tops clean. But there was nothing to be done about the brown smudge on the ceiling.

The mission children—Melissa Moore and especially Cari and Jay Peach—kept me smiling. There was nothing normal about their life in Gaza with its military presence, curfews and unending talk of harm. They were removed from extended families, so the adults in the mission became aunts and uncles. The kids understood, however, that the Journeymen were different and never prefixed our names with "aunt" or "uncle." At age six, Cari made what I considered a brilliant assumption: that being a Journeyman meant I was from Germany. Five-year-old Jay was probably born chattering, and I always enjoyed his company. He once rode with me to Ashkelon for the mail. At the checkpoint, a particularly fierce-looking soldier opened

the passenger door, motioned for Jay to move to the rear seat and squeezed in, propping his automatic rifle between his knees. We rode in silence to the Ashkelon turnoff, where he got out without so much as *toda raba* ("thank you" in Hebrew). After a pause, Jay resumed our conversation from the back seat as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

I was to teach Cari and Melissa using standardized teaching materials from an American educational supplier. Cari was starting first grade; she was bright and eager to learn. Although Patty Moore was a school teacher by profession, Melissa was as much of a challenge as a roomful of kids. In a classroom, students are motivated in part by competition; without peers, Melissa was only vying with her urge to play. She couldn't concentrate on anything for long unless it was turned into a game. But she finally had Cari and Jay as playmates to absorb some of her enormous energy—if they could stand it. Jay was a year away from starting school, and I tried to be especially attentive to him. He was forever saying, "Don, tie my shoe." I might've taught him to do it for himself, but shoe-tying helped me feel useful. Some afternoons, he and Cari came to my apartment for what was supposed to be an art class, and we'd draw a little, sing a little and look at maps to see where on earth we were, so far away from home.

Most Fridays, I drove to Tel Aviv. After running whatever simple hospital errands Ed had for me, I grabbed a bite to eat, usually what passed for a burger from Wimpy, the British fast-food chain, and stopped by the information center at the U.S. Embassy to read a bit of the Sunday *New York Times*. When Carol Beth, Mary Ann and Joy Nicholas returned from school, I was waiting at the dormitory in Herzilya. The American International School was academically excellent, and Anne's home-schooling had been so thorough that her children easily made the transition. The hour and a half drive took them from one world to another, and by then they were at home in both.

The rise in terrorist incidents continued. The Israelis had begun nighttime raids of the homes of suspected terrorists in the camps, and the terrorists were now targeting suspected informants. The pop-pop-pop of gunfire from a nearby street sometimes interrupted my bedtime reading; I would roll off the bed onto the floor and wait. Whatever was happening outside always remained a mystery. There was word from the camps of men being beaten and women rough handled in the night by raiding soldiers, but the *Jerusalem Post* only reported attacks on Israeli vehicles in what they called "Grenade Alley." An Israeli family driving through the Gaza Strip one afternoon had slowed when a young man walked into the road; as they pulled around him, he dropped a hand grenade through the open rear window, killing their two young children. A tragedy that did nothing to advance the legitimate Palestinian cause. Where was Grenade Alley anyway? I had no idea and finally asked Ed. It was the road to Ashkelon, the road I drove just about every day. About then, a cache of weapons was found hidden on the compound, concealed in a stack of building materials behind Ed's office. It came as a shock. The military was contacted, and they removed them. It was obvious that hospital employees were responsible. Could've been anyone. We would never know who.

In late October, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat announced plans to prepare for a limited war with Israel, and Merrill ordered the stockpiling of emergency medical supplies. At the same time, the hospital was facing severe financial troubles, and there was talk of the Israeli government commandeering it. The UNRWA funds weren't covering the rising cost of medical supplies, and the number of patients was on the rise. Then word came from the Mission Board that it was reducing our funding.

None of us took advantage enough of Gaza's gentle Mediterranean surf, or the Beach Club that provided easy access to the sandy beach. I occasionally snorkeled in the shallow water, but it wasn't much fun alone. Merrill and Jarrell had purchased a fiberglass sailboat and invited me to go out with them one early



November afternoon. By then, they'd mastered tacking and jibbing; I was just along for the ride. Captured by a steady breeze, we cruised far from shore, removed from the stresses and urgencies of the hospital, relaxed and free of care. The coastline from that distance was the picture of tranquility. But as we neared the beach, an upstart wave suddenly overturned the boat, pitching the three of us into the shallow water. Welcome back to Gaza.

Mission meetings had always been like congenial family gatherings focused on what more we could or should be doing. But at the November meeting, questions of reducing expenses and services were raised, and differences of opinion and perspective emerged, sometimes in anger. The discussion reached a crescendo with two words never before uttered in a meeting: "That's bullshit!" from Mavis.

What more could *I* be doing? The hospital men's ward consisted of two large rooms lined with beds, and someone suggested I show the patients in the front ward a film strip after their evening meal. The mission had a projector, a portable screen and a supply of Bible-story reels. For someone bedridden, a film strip can pass for entertainment, although it's probably the lowest form of entertainment there is. Each strip came with a script to be read aloud as an image appeared on the screen, and there was always a nurse eager to voice a running translation in Arabic. As I began turning the frames through the projector, a voice boomed from the rear ward: "Robert! Robert! I'm people, too!" It was Abdel Waheb, the rug merchant. He was in for a procedure, and the nurses rolled him into the front ward. I showed filmstrips a couple more times, until the one I selected at random pitted the good Israelites against the wicked Philistines, which didn't go over so well with the Palestinian patients. Those wicked Philistines were most likely among their ancient ancestors.

Mavis is said to have conducted an informal Bible study with her staff, but neither B.J. nor Ava Nell ever suggested that I ought to do anything but befriend the male students and nurses. We found more to talk about than religion: the things we had in common. I've never forgotten them: Ali al-Gamsan, with his red hair and fair complexion, which he attributed to a Crusader ancestor. Mohammed Nasman, with his mischievous little smile and unbounded self-confidence. Husny Abu Qamar, a shy, dreamy-eyed lover of poetry and bodybuilding. Abdullah Abu el-Ouf and Radwan Hassouna with their penetrating questions, a sign of their intellectual brilliance. Mohammed Hassouna, more handsome than Omar Sharif and filled with gentle kindness. Ibrahim Bahader, who had the ease of a man decades older and was always ready to share a joke. I got closest to Adel Abu Mari and Rafik Younis Shalayal, who were unlikely best friends. Adel had the distinction of having an Egyptian father and Bedouin mother, perhaps the source of his independent spirit. He was a natural-born leader, extremely gregarious and quickly becoming fluent in American English. Rafik was a follower; gentle, soft spoken and devoted to his family. "My name," he was quick to say, "means 'your friend,'" and he lived up to it. They and another student, Ibrahim Ashour, somehow managed to rent a spartan, one-room apartment near the hospital; they called it "the kibbutz."

I had left behind a circle of close friends and was lucky that they continued to keep in touch. Whenever the boys noticed me reading a letter, they would tease, "Is that from your S.H.?" It's hard to say whether any of my girl friends was exactly my "sweetheart," but there was no lack of affection between us. Six thousand miles away, I could only hope. The boys, no doubt, had romantic interests, but Muslim culture forbade anything beyond hope. They were years away from the formalities and high finance of taking a bride, who might not even be their preferred S.H. Whatever passion they felt was harbored and channeled into their studies and work, without the distracting angst and jealousy of American-style courtship. They were smart and motivated to better themselves and their families.

Their interest in U.S. history and current events surprised me. They were at a loss to understand America's bloody war in Vietnam. (Who wasn't?) They admired "Ibrahim Linkolon" and Muhammed Ali, and were intrigued by Shirley Chisholm, the Black congresswoman, who had announced her candidacy for the presidency. They often had questions about the colloquial English they'd picked up from us, like "What does *orkydorky* mean?" It was *okee-dokey*, which meant "OK." I in turn asked them for help with everything I wanted to say in Arabic. One day I realized that I was beginning to speak it almost without thinking and often understood the gist of a conversation I overheard. In the boys' company, I had become less hesitant to make a fool of myself in forming those words and stringing them together. It just happened the way it would for a child. Children, to meet their immediate wants and needs, don't keep silent because they're afraid of mispronouncing a word or making a grammatical error. And they begin learning to read or write their native language only after they're conversant in it. There's a sort of poetry to Arabic—the response to "good morning" in Arabic is literally "May your day be filled with light"—and the sound of that language was becoming music to my ears.

Each year the nursing school graduated a class of ten or twelve students ready for full-time employment there or at the government hospital. Even so, most of the boys spoke of emigrating to Kuwait or Egypt for better paying jobs or to further their education. Being a nurse wasn't enough. Their nursing diploma opened wide the doorway to greater possibilities.

*I know today that at least three of these students would earn medical degrees and practice in Norway, India and Gaza. Another completed his education in anesthesiology at the University of Tennessee and would later be appointed to its faculty, while two others graduated in engineering from Georgia Tech and settled in Texas. No doubt there are others of outstanding achievement.*

## December 1971

Journeyman were granted a total of four weeks of vacation, and a group of us who had gone through training together made plans for a get-together in East Africa at Christmas. I'd already used one week when my mother visited and would spend the remainder (and then some) there. That meant missing Christmas with the Mission Family. Mavis was only too happy to take in Dilbert while I was away. For all Dilbert and Jacques knew, they were the only two dogs on the planet, and they played together like little kids. Mavis also had a gift for me: a coffee carafe filled with pecans her family had sent from Louisiana.

Eight of us Journeyman—men and women from Austria, Rhodesia, Kenya and Tanzania—met in Nairobi, Kenya. When one of the women first caught sight of me, she came rushing with her arms spread open, expecting a hug, while I reached out with a handshake. That's what we did in Gaza, and I felt so awkward. They had lived their year, I had lived mine, and our experiences had been radically different.

It was springtime in the southern hemisphere, and we traveled by Land Rover, market bus and train until it seemed there was nothing left to see or do. We had taken a photo safari at Ngorongoro Crater, seen (without climbing) Kilimanjaro, swum in the Indian Ocean, shopped for ebony wood carvings in Mombasa, stood on the Equator, and dined on zebra in Arusha and in British Colonial style at Nairobi's Thorn Tree Café. I turned twenty-five before departing for Tel Aviv on January 6, laden with pineapples to share with the Mission Family and too many souvenirs. There would be an overnight layover in Addis Ababa. I thought nothing of sleeping in the airport, but the terminal closed after the last flight of the day. Although I had no visa to enter Ethiopia, a bus took me to a cheap Italian hotel in Addis. As I was checking in, I realized I also

had no passport. I hardly slept. The next day was Ethiopia's Christmas, and the U.S. Embassy would be closed. Expecting to be stranded there for days, I boarded the airport bus anyway, happened to sit in the same seat, and there was my passport on the floor.

The East African landscape and wildlife had been stunning. The Journeyman who'd traveled from Salzburg had said, "I bet Gaza is beautiful, too." No, not really. My camera and I had spent a year looking for its beauty. There were stunning sunsets, rustic old fishing boats hauled up on the beach, the military cemetery, the gazelles I sometimes spotted in the dunes near the northern border, the minaret outside my window, the dense orange groves, the hospital gardens, but they were only picturesque. What beauty there was, was in the people.

## Winter 1972

The new year had arrived. My weeks away were everything a vacation was meant for, and I returned energized to make the last five months matter. While I was gone, the mission began getting ready to welcome Tom and Marilyn Nabors and their two children, who would arrive on January 20. He'd been appointed hospital administrator, which would eventually free Ed to do more pastoral work. Arrangements for the Nabors's Arabic studies and living arrangements in Bethlehem had been made, but they would also need transportation. So Ed and I were to drive to Tel Aviv to pick up and register a new VW minibus after he preached the late afternoon service on January 16. We would depart with his three daughters, cross the border before sunset, drop the girls off at their dorm north of Tel Aviv and sleep that night at the farm. I would then drive the new vehicle back to Gaza on Monday morning.

That was my job, but having been away for most of a month and driven to Tel Aviv the previous Friday, it was the very last thing I wanted to do. There was a brief mission meeting after the morning service to review the arrangements for getting the Nabors settled. When Ed mentioned our picking up the new minibus, Mavis immediately volunteered to go in my place, saying she could use an overnight getaway.

Following the afternoon service, Mavis was waiting outside the church with her overnight bag, ready to join Ed and the girls for the hurried drive to the border. She was wearing a long black skirt over black boots and a white blouse with billowy long sleeves. It was her favorite look, always reminding me of the school marm in an old Western movie.

Ava Nell located me in the men's ward four hours later: "I need you to come up to my apartment right now." It hardly took two minutes to cross the driveway and climb two flights of stairs, not enough time to wonder why she'd called. I found Ann, Jean, Joanna and B.J. sitting in silence. Ava Nell said, "Mavis was killed in an attack before they got to the border." My friend who said yes to life. Ava Nell went on to say that Ed had been wounded and was undergoing surgery at the Central Hospital of the Negev in Be'er Sheva where they'd been taken, that one of the Nicholas girls had been injured by flying shards of glass. I was too stunned to take it in. Before we went our separate ways, someone probably whispered a prayer and Ava Nell said she'd have sleeping pills sent to my apartment.

The attack was headline news back home. My mother phoned first thing the next morning; she'd never called before, and I did my best to tell her what little I knew and allay her fears for my safety. Had she not visited six months earlier, I'm sure she would've urged me to leave. (By then, brother Mike was stationed in Bangkok supporting the troops in Vietnam.) As word spread, there would hardly be a quiet few minutes in that day to grieve for my friend. We learned that on Sunday morning soldiers had shot and killed a suspected

terrorist and another man along the road leading to the Erez checkpoint. The late afternoon attack that followed was an act of revenge, an eye for an eye. The minibus' silver license plate had been indistinguishable in the dusky light. The Israelis had spotted the tracer bullets fired by automatic rifles from an orange grove near the Jabalia Refugee Camp and soon arrived on the scene. They had helicoptered Mavis and Ed to the Soroka Hospital at Be'er Sheva, 25 miles away, and General Moshe Dayan was summoned there. Merrill, Dr. McGlamery, Ava Nell and B.J. had driven to Be'er Sheva during the night and returned with news that neither of Ed's two wounds was life-threatening. Three bullets had struck Mavis; the one to her head was an always fatal injury. Her family was contacted, and they recalled that when Mavis first began working overseas, she said she should be buried wherever she died. A grave site was selected in a quiet, grassy area behind the nursing school. The funeral was scheduled for ten o'clock Tuesday morning, and the hospital carpenters were building a simple coffin.

The logistics of certifying the death of and burying an American civilian overseas are complicated. Much of the detail work was coordinated by Jarrell and Merrill while Dr. McGlamery focused on keeping the hospital functioning. The Israelis required a special permit for transporting Mavis's body back across the border, and the Gaza Municipality required another for her burial on the hospital grounds. Neither could be issued without a death certificate from the Be'er Sheva hospital. Ken Mullican, who was to assume Ed's administrative duties during his recovery, had accompanied Anne Nicholas to Be'er Sheva that morning and was left at the hospital to confer with Ed about the most pressing needs. Ken would then return in the ambulance that carried Mavis's remains. But the ambulance was delayed in Gaza until the permit was in hand, and there would be no permits without the death certificate from the hospital in Be'er Sheva.

So, in midafternoon, I was dispatched to Be'er Sheva to retrieve the death certificate. When the Bug wouldn't start—something that hardly ever happened—I borrowed one of the VW minibuses. At the Be'er Sheva hospital, I got the death certificate and visited Ed, explaining the delay to Ken. We realized there was no way I could make it back to Gaza in time for the permits to be processed and the ambulance to then drive to Be'er Sheva and back before the border closed at sunset. I had the death certificate and the minibus, and Ken and I knew there was only one option.

The attendants at the hospital morgue were waiting for someone to claim Mavis's body and probably would have given it to anyone who came asking. They just pointed to a table where it lay carelessly wrapped head



*Press Photo of Anne Nicholas and Her Daughters at the Funeral Service*

to toe in bloodied sheets, without offering a stretcher or gurney, much less a kind word or helping hand. As Ken and I carried the covered corpse outside and slid it onto the rear deck of the minibus, one of Mavis's swollen, blood-spattered hands was exposed. Not something either of us wanted to see. I drove as fast as possible, shuddering over every bump in the road and keeping an eye out for the hospital ambulance. Ken and I spoke of the emptiness that overwhelmed each of us. We could hardly breathe and worried we might not get past the eastern border without calling attention to what we were illegally transporting. At the crossing, we nonchalantly held up our passports, got the nod to continue and drove on. It was a relief to pass through the compound gate. I parked outside the morgue, and we found the Mission Family gathered at the nursing school. They were planning the funeral and waiting for the death certificate, and appreciated the risk we'd taken in returning with Mavis.



The service was brief and simple. The *Jerusalem Post* overestimated “nearly 500 mourners” and noted that a contingent of female Israeli soldiers arrived with a large wreath of flowers. In addition to the church members, hospital staff and Israel mission, there were representatives from the U.S. Embassy, the Israeli military government, the Gaza Municipality and UNRWA. I spotted Mr. Irany in the crowd. A news photo was snapped of Anne and the three Nicholas daughters, with Carol Beth on crutches due to her slight wounds. The church was packed; people were standing. I had been assigned to man the door, with no specific instructions, and when a television camera crew showed up, I made the mistake of barring them from entering. In that moment, turning them away seemed best, but I wasn’t thinking of Mavis’s family. If only a few seconds of the service were to have aired on American television, they would have seen all those people who were there to honor her. I’ve deeply regretted my shortsightedness ever since.

The days afterward were sorrowful, uneasy and awkward for everyone who lived, worked and studied in the compound. But there was work to be done. After being closed to new patients for two days, the hospital reopened. Mavis’s efficient O.R. staff were a credit to her disciplined training, and Lenore Mullican agreed to take on her responsibilities. The Moores adopted Mavis’s dog, and Shirley Peach volunteered to sort through her personal belongings. I vaguely remember driving to the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv to deliver the paperwork they required. The duty of cleaning out the bullet-riddled minibus fell to Jarrell; what he saw, he couldn’t talk about. Bill Marshall traveled from Cyprus to provide each of us what passed for grief counseling. In Nicosia five months earlier, he told me, “The best is yet to come,” which this was not. Then the Nabors family arrived, as scheduled, and we all made an effort to be upbeat and put them at ease. After a few days of getting acquainted, they began their Arabic studies in Bethlehem, where they undoubtedly felt more safe. One afternoon shortly after, five-year-old Jay spotted me arriving with the mail and followed me upstairs where I began sorting it. “This one’s for Aunt Mavis,” I said, setting a letter aside. He was quiet for a moment, then said with utter solemnity, “I can take it up when I go.”

A number of suspected terrorists had immediately been arrested and held for questioning, and the P.L.O. is said to have dropped off a letter, apologizing for their “mistake” and urging us to be more careful. (Three young men, ages 18, 19 and 22, would eventually be charged with the crime.) The army wasted no time in bulldozing the orange grove where the terrorists had hidden. Whenever I drove past it, going to and from Ashkelon, I couldn’t help but think of Mavis. She had taken my place, and I blamed myself.

Our sad little Mission Family closed ranks, and for a couple of weeks I felt distanced from the male nurses and students. We would never discuss what had happened. It was hard to accept that Mavis and Ed were simply two more innocent victims of terrorism, which impacted some Gaza family nearly every day. *Politics* is about who gets what and how. And if there was anything that was constantly on every Gazan’s mind it was politics: who got Palestine, their homeland, and how. Without the leadership of a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, terrorism had become the accepted, gravely mistaken *how*.

## Spring 1972

None of the students was born in what was now Israel, but every one of them could tell you the name of their family’s village there and describe their home or farm. Some families still had their house keys, waiting for the day they’d return to claim a house that was likely long gone. The boys had been taught from birth to view the Israelis as monsters, not even human, and had never laid eyes on a Jew before the 1956 invasion. One of the students, Abdullah Abu el-Ouf, remembered his family hiding in their house as the soldiers passed outside. He would have been five or six years old then. The window was shuttered, but he stole a peek. “I couldn’t believe my eyes,” he said, “they looked just like us.”

The Baptist missions in Israel and Gaza were separate entities, but we enjoyed an especially warm relationship with Jim and Betty Smith. They lived in Ashkelon and were the only Christians in that pleasant city of 40,000. Open proselytizing was illegal in Israel, and it appeared that they were mainly there to build personal relationships, which was the Baptist Convention of Israel's general strategy. Jim had even joined the Rotary Club. He and Betty were also dedicated to somehow reconciling the Israelis and Palestinians. To that end, they set up informal meetings that would bring representatives of the two groups face to face for friendly conversation. One weekend afternoon, B.J., a couple of the nurses and I visited the home of one of the Smiths' neighbors. All I remember is how intimidating it was for the nurses to enter this fairly posh, modern house and sit facing several middle-aged Israeli couples, everyone perfectly polite, and answer routine questions about the nursing program.

Again: What more could I do? It seemed to me that the boys would benefit from traveling outside the Gaza Strip, those 139 square miles in which most of them had lived every single day of their lives. It would be good for them to see Arabs and Israelis coexisting in relative peace. In the remaining months, I invited three of them at a time, one from each class, for an outing, usually a weekend day trip. In Tel Aviv, one group rode an escalator and elevator for the first time, not without serious fear, to the top of the 34-story Shalom Tower, at that time the tallest building in Asia, then we caught a John Wayne western. In Jerusalem, another group visited the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque before we walked along the top of the Old City wall. Another time, we spent a night at the boarding school at the farm, then drove to the Roman aqueduct and amphitheatre at Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. And for others, a drive through the upper Negev to the Dead Sea.

One morning, there was a knock on my door. A couple of the boys stood there smiling with a bowl of *mulukhia* for my breakfast. It was a sort of stew made from something very green, which gave it the appearance of having been scooped from an algae pond. I struggled through a few spoonfuls and saved the rest "for later." I would introduce them to mayonnaise and bacon, with mixed results. Mayonnaise received fairly high marks. Both Islamic and Hebrew dietary laws forbid the consumption of pork, but there was one butcher shop in Israel that sold it. The price was high, but from time to time, someone in the Mission Family would ask me to bring home some bacon when I was in Tel Aviv, and I always got a few slices for myself. A couple of the boys dared to ask for a taste. Mama may not have taught Mike and me to cook, but she taught us to fry. So I fried a couple of strips for the curious students. One bite was enough to satisfy their curiosity. No one asked for seconds, and it apparently had no ill effect.

The male nurses and students changed clothes and sometimes slept in the upstairs of an old building next to the carpenter shop, facing my apartment. When I finally got around to taking a look at it, I was surprised to find one large room with wall-to-wall cots, peeling paint, a less than sanitary Arab-style toilet and a separate room with lockers. Ava Nell gave me the go-ahead to approach Abu Awani, the splendid fellow who supervised the maintenance of the hospital facilities, about making some improvements. I requested a thorough cleaning, a fresh coat of paint and four bunk beds. Abu Awani agreed to have the work done, but he had no idea of what a bunk bed was. So I measured and drew up plans for the carpenters. Weeks later, he invited me to inspect the freshly painted walls and domed ceiling. I hadn't suggested a color, and the paint he'd chosen was the color of Pepto Bismol. I said, "But Abu Awani, pink is a girl's color." After a few seconds' thought, he replied, "Don't tell the boys." Problem solved. The bunk beds were installed, opening up the center of the room for circulation.

The Canadian Embassy in Tel Aviv represented its National Film Board and offered excellent documentary films for loan, free of charge. So I started stopping there on Fridays and borrowing a few to show the

students, both male and female, in their off hours. No matter the subject, it was entertainment and gave us something new to talk about.

Late afternoons, I exercised Dilbert on the compound. She seemed to get a kick out of my chasing her around and around a large reflecting pool in one of the gardens. (Whenever she got away from me, she headed straight into the hospital, up two steep flights of stairs and was waiting outside Mavis's door.) At that time of day, the compound was quiet. The outpatients and visitors had departed, the gate was closed, and the male students and day-shift nurses were leaving for home. It seemed like the perfect time for some sort of activity. The boys made good use of the basketball court, but I'd never been an athlete and didn't join in. A fitness program came to mind. I got a copy of the *Royal Canadian Air Force Exercise Plans for Physical Fitness* and wrote to Walter Porter, the campus minister at Auburn, asking if they could donate sweatshirts and a frisbee. The orange sweatshirts that arrived a few weeks later were all it took to assemble a group for what I called Spring Training. Every workday afternoon, we did calisthenics on the tennis court and ran laps around it in preparation for a twelve-mile hike from Ashkelon to Gaza City six weeks later.

Patty Moore had teaching credentials, and Anne had enlisted her to teach English at the library. The opportunity to improve one's English, taught by a native speaker, proved quite a draw for teenagers, and the Center of Culture and Light was finally on the right track. In a bookstore near the Ashkelon post office, I came across an edition of Dickens's *Great Expectations* that had been edited for younger readers. That gave me the idea for a conversational English class for teenagers centered around reading and discussing this book. Anne liked the idea, books were purchased, and the class was filled soon after it was announced. The eight boys and two girls were bright and enthusiastic. They did their homework, and Dickens's vivid characters and plot twists gave us plenty to talk and sometimes laugh about. This was one of my favorite experiences. I wished I'd thought of it a year earlier and hoped it redeemed me in Anne's eyes. By then, she was busy making arrangements for the family's upcoming furlough, which couldn't have come at a better time.

Teaching Melissa and Cari was pure pleasure. Their sweet innocence was a distraction from weightier things, and I enjoyed the regular contact with the Moore and Peach families. Jay Peach, who would've been happily enrolled in kindergarten back in the States, naturally felt left out. He had a friend in Sammy, an Arab Christian boy a bit older who lived adjacent to the compound, and it was gratifying to watch boys being boys whenever they played together. But that would never be often enough. One morning I arrived for Cari's lesson and found Jay waiting at the gate. He said Cari wasn't going to have her class that day, so we sat on the bumper of the Bug and chatted a while. Later in the day, Shirley called to ask about my having missed the class. Jay, in his own way, was saying, "I'm people, too."

In early April, the Israelis raided a vacant house on a Zaytoun District side street just behind the compound. In fact, this was the ground floor of the locker room that adjoined the male nurses' sleeping quarters. In all the years that the Baptists had maintained the hospital, no one had taken particular notice of a padlocked door that opened on stairs leading to a room below and, as it turned out, from there to the street. There was evidence that fugitive terrorists had been hiding there. Dr. McGlamery assisted the military in making a thorough search of the entire compound. I was away at the time and returned to find an X in blue chalk on my door, indicating the apartment had been examined. I wondered how Dilbert reacted when the soldiers entered, but she wasn't talking.

It wasn't long before two middle-aged American women appeared from nowhere to volunteer in the hospital.

Their husbands were employed by Chicago-based Birds Eye Frozen Foods, then developing a production facility in Israel. Neither had medical experience, so Ava Nell put them to work in the sewing room. They spent several days each week there, occasionally visiting the children's ward, and were for the most part congenial. They even donated a television to the recreation area of the nursing school. I learned later that one of them took note of my friend Adil writing the word *propaganda* on a piece of paper and became alarmed enough to have Ava Nell question his intent. It was a new word to him; he was only practicing its spelling.

*When Palestinian terrorists murdered nine Israeli Olympic athletes in Munich the following July, their visits ended. I've often wondered at the unlikelihood of their being in Gaza in the first place. Neither of them was Baptist. They could only have been aware of the hospital from news reports of Mavis's death, which would've deterred any Midwestern housewife with good sense. I recall one of them name-dropping "General Sharon," who apparently secured their safe passage into and out of the Gaza Strip. (Ariel Sharon then led the Southern Command of the Israeli Defense Force with a heavy hand and would later serve as Israel's prime minister.) Given the mission's recent links to terrorism, I'm now convinced that they were planted in the hospital to observe our work and report on anything suspicious.*

Six of the boys had faithfully kept to the afternoon exercise regimen, and the Saturday for our twelve-mile trek arrived in mid May. Saturday was the Jewish *shabbat*. In those days, public activity throughout Israel came to a halt from sundown on Fridays until sundown on Saturdays, even though most of the Israelis weren't particularly religious. The boys received the necessary permits, and Joanna drove us to the Ashkelon turnoff. All of us were wearing the bright orange sweatshirts. As I remember it, we began as marchers, but by the time we reached the border, in the heat of the afternoon and without having thought to carry water, we were creepers. After passing through the checkpoint, a couple of the boys hung back, saying they'd catch up with us. We four trudged on, only four miles to go, when a taxi slowed behind us and the two slackers waved as they rode past. The final leg took us down busy Omar al-Mukhtar St., which had never seen anything like our little orange parade. Sad to say, that was the first and only time I ever took a walk on Gaza City's main street.

Adel, Rafik and Ibrahim finally invited me to visit their "kibbutz," a short walk from the compound. It was a barely furnished room, but they were proud of it. There were five of us, including Ibrahim's older brother Khalid, a nurse in the hospital's O.R. whom I hardly knew. They served tea and honey-sweet pastries. As I was leaving, Khalid shook my hand and then kissed my cheek. I was stunned; it was the most intimate contact I'd had with anyone in such a long, long time.

Despite Mavis's sad fate, having "trusted Arabs" emboldened me to take a few supposed risks. A couple of the boys took me across Palestine Square to the souk, where a tailor measured me for a traditional jellabiya and robe. Otherwise, I'd have lived there two years without ever entering that fascinating place. The Israelis had built a security road that paralleled the northern border from the Erez checkpoint to the sea. The narrow, two-mile strip of asphalt was straight as an arrow, flowing over one sand dune after another through what had long been a no-man's-land. Returning from Ashkelon, I occasionally took this detour, sometimes spotting gazelles among the dunes. "Refugee camp" remained at the top of my list of forbidden places, although UNRWA's food distribution center just outside the Beach Refugee Camp was a standard stop on a tour of Gaza. I'd taken my mother there when she visited.

The Arabs are justly famous for their hospitality. Other members of the Mission Family spoke of being invited to homes for a meal, but it was only with the end in sight that I was to enjoy that experience. Mohammed Nasman's family lived comparatively well on the western edge of the Beach Camp, near the



mosque where his father was employed as custodian. Mohammed's dinner invitation couldn't have been more welcome. Mohammed Hassouna and Ibrahim Bahader accompanied me, guiding the Bug through the maze of alleys that crisscrossed the camp. It was an honor to meet the Nasman family and see Mohammed as their respectful son and a doting older brother. We—that is, the men—sat in a circle on mats outside the several rooms that comprised their home. Mohammed's mother and sisters brought out an enormous round tray heaped with couscous and succulent chicken roasted with pine nuts, herbs and spices. Couscous is made from moistened flour laboriously rolled between the palms of the hands into tiny beads, then cooked like pasta. There were no plates or utensils, and Mohammed demonstrated how to cup my fingers into a pointed scoop that took the place of a fork. Hand washing followed the meal. My first and only true Arab meal, and it was memorably *zaki* (delicious).

## June 1972

My departure date was June 14, a Sunday, and I began making arrangements a month earlier. Realizing that my time was growing short, some of the boys planned a party on the beach. They brought food and melons, and we spent an afternoon swimming and playing like kids. Others began dropping off gifts, wonderful things they had made themselves. Nothing touched me more than the nurse's "soda jerk" cap that B.J. arranged for each of the students to stitch with their initials in red thread. Every one of these simple gifts said, "Remember me."



*Ibrahim, Rafik and Adel at the Beach Party*

The cost of flying Dilbert to Alabama was prohibitive, but the Nabors family promised to give her a good home. The hospital's carpenters built a sturdy crate large enough to hold a wicker rocking chair, some of Abdel Wahib's rugs and the many other things I'd acquired. Shipped from the seaport at Ashdod, it would take two months to reach Birmingham. A couple of days before my departure, the lid was nailed tight and the crate loaded into a van. Ibrahim Bahader drove with me to Ashdod. It was said that lions had long been extinct in Israel, but that early morning Ibrahim and I witnessed a mother lion with two cubs crossing the road north of Ashkelon.

Having listened day in and day out to BBC World Service and Voice of America programming, I had decided to return to Auburn and work on a Master's in mass communication. There was a lot of the world to see between Gaza and Auburn, and I would take the Simplon Orient Express, alone, from Istanbul through Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, stopping in Venice and Florence, then through Switzerland and France before debording in London and railroading the English countryside for ten days.

Sunday, June 14, arrived, and after the morning service, I said my good-byes to the Mission Family. Ava Nell had hosted the customary farewell gathering the night before. She, B.J. and Joanna were to drive me to the Tel Aviv airport after lunch and had selected several of the students to come along. The boys were accustomed to Israeli fighter jets streaking overhead, trailed by sonic booms, but none had ever seen an airport. After their permits were processed, Mohammed Nasman, said, "At that airport, I'm going to kiss you on the mouth!" No one thought to offer me lunch that day, and my refrigerator and pantry were empty, so after a last look at Mavis's grave, I stopped by the hospital kitchen and begged a piece of bread. In the last hour, alone in the apartment, holding Dilbert close, I cried uncontrollably.

We arrived at the airport amid the tightest possible security. A week earlier, a terrorist attack by three members of the Japanese Red Army, a militant communist organization, had resulted in the deaths of 26 tourists and many times that number with injuries. A senseless massacre. A Palestinian group was behind it, and a new phase of terrorism had begun. Heavily armed soldiers were everywhere, and our passports and papers were closely examined as we entered. The boys were nervous, and before I stepped on the escalator, we solemnly shook hands. *Ma Salaama*. Peace be with you. It was over.

دون روبرٹس

*Don Roberts*  
*March 1, 2022*

## Afterward

Within a couple of years, I lost touch with nearly everyone I'd known in Gaza. What was to happen afterward—the half-century of push-and-pull change set against a background of yet unending conflict with Israel—has been gathered from mostly secondary sources online.

Not long after I left, the Mission was absorbed by the Baptist Convention of Israel and, as I understand it, became more aggressively evangelistic. This paralleled the denomination's about-face from the progressive direction it had taken in the late sixties. In 1976, UNRWA made substantial reductions to the hospital's funding, citing financial considerations, but also its concerns over the hospital's increased proselytizing. Within a year, most of the medical missionaries I'd known had departed. After UNRWA's funding ceased in 1978, the hospital became a private facility, prohibitively expensive for refugee patients. That year, Ed and Anne Nicholas transferred to Beirut, Lebanon, where he took a position at a theological seminary and she taught English as a second language.

Ava Nell McWhorter would be the last of my Mission Family to leave, in 1983, when after thirty years of serving the people of Gaza, the Baptist Hospital was transferred to the Anglican Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, becoming al-Ahli Arab Hospital. (*Al-ahli* translates as “national.”) The Anglicans took control of its operations, but the several remaining Baptist doctors and nurses helped staff the hospital and School of Health Sciences. That same year, the extremist Muslim Brotherhood targeted the hospital in an aggressive campaign against foreign influence in Gaza, making false allegations about the Americans, initiating a nursing student strike and ultimately storming the hospital compound. By then, Israel's lust for Gaza's land had resulted in the construction of settlements within the already densely populated area. The first Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) began in 1987. Organized protests, civil disobedience, labor strikes and rock-throwing riots continued throughout Gaza and the West Bank. That spring, the School of Health Sciences graduated its final class of seven women and seven men before closing for good. The Israel Defense Forces instituted a policy of what they called “force, might and beatings” to put down the revolt. When the uprising ended in 1993, at least 1,087 Palestinians had died, 240 of whom were children; more than 7,800 were hospitalized. At the same time, 160 Israelis had died, a hundred of them civilians.

With a new century in sight, Gaza was propelled from its backward isolation into the modern world via the Internet. This gave its people a clear view beyond their borders as well as a voice. The benefits were legion, but there was also a negative aspect: accessibility to the network of radical Islamists whose violent tactics would bring powerful nations to their knees. The second *intifada* began in 2000 and lasted five years. Rock throwing was replaced by rocket launching, and an estimated 1,000 Israelis and 5,000 Palestinians died.

In 2005, Gazans celebrated Israel's long-awaited disengagement from the Gaza Strip. The Israeli settlements were dismantled and their 9,000 residents forcibly evicted. Even so, Israel continued to control Gaza's air space, coastline and border crossings, reserving the right of its military to enter at will. Gaza paid a steep price for their good-bye: The borders were sealed, all but halting imports and exports, and tens of thousands of Gaza laborers lost their jobs in Israel. As before, Gaza depended on Israel for water, electricity and telecommunications.

The prospect of this presumed peaceful resolution had encouraged oil-rich Arab countries to pour money into development. Gaza entered the 21st century with a small international airport, seaside resort hotels, shopping malls, restaurants and, more significantly, modern hospitals and four universities. Its refugee camps would become towns with multi-story apartment blocks, and the stimulated economy resulted in the creation of something new: an educated middle class.

The long-sought independent Palestinian state and peaceful coexistence that should have followed were not to

be. Hamas, an Islamic fundamentalist party, took control of Gaza in 2007. They encouraged terrorist activity, and a year later, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against Hamas targets in Gaza. The three-week war that followed has been called the Gaza War, as well as the Gaza Massacre. Civilian deaths there numbered 1,181. Ten Israeli soldiers and three civilians died. Areas of Gaza City were leveled, leaving 50,000 people homeless. In 2014, Operation Protective Edge resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1,600 Palestinian civilians and six Israeli civilians. And again in 2021: 128 Palestinian civilian and 13 Israeli deaths.

Baptists remained in Gaza, shifting their focus from medicine to education, allying with international humanitarian organizations to teach English as a second language. Worship services moved from the compound to the Center of Culture and Light, the five-room library that Anne Nicholas had founded. It eventually became a six-storied building with an expanded library, guest rooms, a worship hall and an outreach center offering English classes.

The updated al-Ahli Arab Hospital continued to be funded and administered by the Anglican Episcopal, fully staffed by Palestinian medical personnel. In addition to a state-of-the-art cancer treatment facility, it operated community clinics throughout the Gaza Strip. It had been the first hospital in Gaza, and of the eleven medical facilities serving a population of more than two million, it was the only nongovernmental, charity hospital.

A decade after the School of Health Sciences closed, a partnership of Christian organizations repurposed that fine building as a kindergarten and elementary school known as the Gaza Lighthouse, providing the children of needy families a caring, high-quality private-school education with tuition scholarships. My friend Mavis Pate is buried in a secluded spot behind the school. Her death was the central event of my time in Gaza, and her well-tended grave is the only vestige there of the Mission Family I knew.



*The joyful first day of the 2019 school year at the Gaza Lighthouse school.*

In October 2023, brutal Hamas terrorists invaded southern Israel, mercilessly slaying a reported 1,139 people, of whom 373 were security forces, before returning to Gaza with as many as 253 hostages. The Israel-Hamas War that followed resulted in the leveling of every town and city in the Gaza Strip, leaving more than two million Gazans homeless. One evening early in the war, a missile launched within Gaza by a terrorist organization misfired and fell into the al-Ahli Arab Hospital compound. Although damage to the medical facility was limited, at least one hundred civilians sheltering on the compound grounds are said to have died, and many more were injured. Weeks later, an Israeli airstrike hit a facility of the nearby St. Porphyrius Church, killing eighteen innocents. As I update this in 2025, more than 55,000 Gazans have died, seventy percent of whom were women and children. Even more have been gravely injured. Malnutrition and the absence of routine health care have claimed additional lives, while thousands more remain unaccounted for, including those buried under rubble. Ninety percent of the fatalities are believed to be civilians. Hospitals, schools and UNRWA facilities have been destroyed.

Let's get this one thing straight: Opposition to the Israeli government is not antisemitism.

I once lived in this place called Gaza, among good people yearning and waiting for Justice, a favor they had ever been denied. From afar, I've watched their reasoned appeals revert to murderous demands, as the Truth at the core of this crime against their humanity fades with each new generation—while madmen rule and rage.

