

# Easter in RAMALLAH

by trevor baumgartner

This Easter morning the phone rattled my eardrums and when I picked up, the voice on the other end trembled through, "trevor, I'm Hurriya." My 12-year-old friend lives in a town called Ramallah. I spent my last hours in Palestine with her. We whispered through the early January snowfall, up and down the barren south Ramallah streets. Before I climbed into the car that would take me to the airport, she slipped her fingers around my wrist, looked into my face, and said, "In the whole world you are my best friend."

Hurriya means "freedom" in Arabic. Her father Mahmoud and mother Lutfiye named her, their last child, after a term that's currently being brutalized out of existence. Hurriya took her first breath in the middle of the first Intifada for Independence. Mahmoud, a trade unionist, was underground again, as he had been during the birth of his other two children. In those days any localized organizing represented a threat to Yassir Arafat's desire to return to Palestine as THE leader of the Palestinian people. He undercut the local organizers, buying them and/or everyone around them off. The leaders who were not for sale, like Mahmoud, found themselves in a precarious position--having to dodge not just the obvious Israeli occupying forces, but also to take cover from their own people as smear campaigns gained momentum.

But Mahmoud is one of the "lucky" ones. He's not in prison now and he's still able to work.

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"[The IDF soldiers] kill nine from our street. They go for the men between 15-45, to take them to the prison, or ..." she didn't say what we both know, which is that the young men who aren't privileged enough to be trucked off to prison don't come back at all. Hurriya isn't talking about "targeted preventions"--the Israeli Ministry of Truth's favorite doublespeak term. She means summary execution. Nine happened on the street in front of her apartment in the last two days.

"Next time they come for my brother maybe. I don't know."

Majd, her brother, is 18. He's one of the many young Palestinian men who struggle mightily to concentrate in school. Any sound from outside may be a tank rolling in to shell the school or rip up the playground. Again. Or a Boeing Apache Helicopter about to rocket a nearby police station or "empty" building. Or an F16 screeching overhead, en route to bomb who knows what.

"Yesterday the tanks walked in the street. They cut the water. We have no electricity. Maybe they cut the phone next. I don't know."

I asked if she was scared. "At first I was. But now just poquito!" she said, mixing in the only Spanish word (meaning "a little bit") she remembers from our language lessons. "Yesterday I go to the children next to me. I played with them because I want them to forget everything. But they still scared ... Okay, trevor. I have to go now because the tanks are shooting."

We hung up our phones and I immediately cursed myself because I forgot to get her number (I didn't carry it with me on my way out of the country for fear of Israeli Security finding it. They have a reputation of following up.) And that was it.

*Easter morning.*

And what now? What am I to do, now that my friend, 12-year-old Hurriya from Ramallah, has called me and left me with the images of the tanks outside her window? What am I, indeed what are we, to do at this very moment in history, staring at wholesale starvation and slaughter of people we know? These are not people who "hate us." They are people who can't understand why their cousins and fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers have been forced at gunpoint to waste away in refugee camps for over 50 years. Further, they can't understand why "we" would turn our eyes from them. Do we not believe that everyone is created equal? Do we not love freedom?

Hurriya. Hurriya. I see you. I see you. I'll always fight for you because, Hurriya, I believe in you. ☆

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