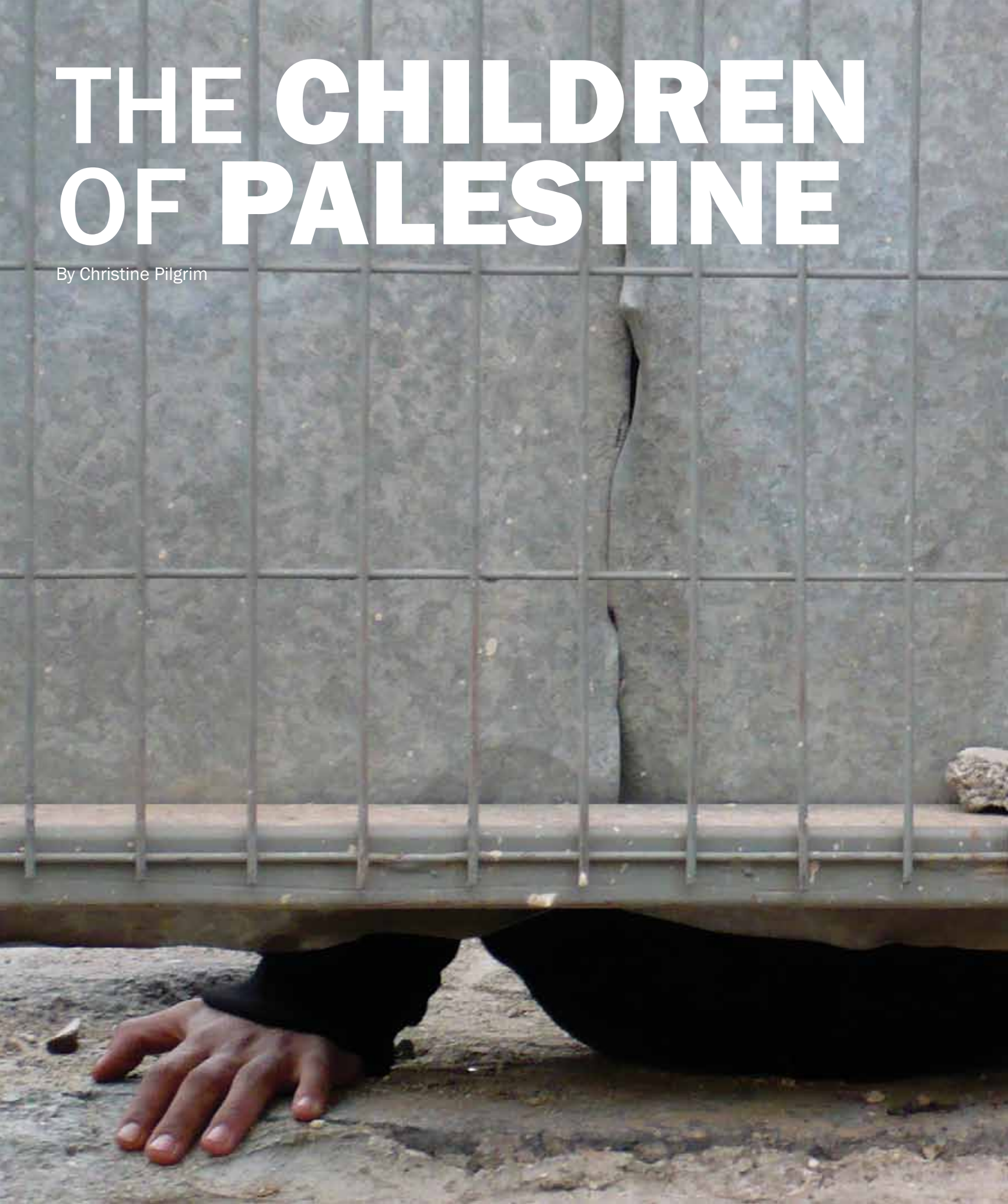


THE CHILDREN OF PALESTINE

By Christine Pilgrim



THE PALESTINIAN BOY who sits on the ground against the metal gate of the Israeli military base has not thrown a stone at a soldier or shouted at the driver of a bulldozer. Neither has he stolen, nor tried to blow himself or anyone else up. He has simply failed to produce an identity card.

The Okanagan Valley is a world away from this reality.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, all Palestinians aged 16 and over are required to carry cards to identify who they are and where they live. Palestinian youth can be tried under military law and imprisoned for not carrying ID cards or for being outside their designated zones.

Problems arise when someone aged 13 or 14 looks older. Some boys as young as 12 have been held for questioning. If proof of their age is not submitted, they are transported from the military base to court where they can be handcuffed and remain under 'administrative detention' indefinitely. In such cases, Israeli lawyers advise international organizations like the Red Cross and Christian Peacemakers Team to intervene as early as possible, before any formal detention process begins.

One such Peacemaker is Armstrong resident, Johann Funk. He recently spent eight weeks in Area C in the old city of Hebron, about 26 kilometres south of Jerusalem. There he helped this youth and several others detained at military bases. (Area C is under total Israeli control.)

This is the fourth year that Funk has acted as Peacemaker. His mandate is to observe and report. When he watched a young child forced to cross Quitoun Checkpoint on her way to kindergarten, he wrote:-

“She is a vision of innocence, peering up into the dull eyes of the towering soldier who had ordered her to stop. She strains to hand him the backpack that is half her length. He systematically opens every zipper and plunges his hands into each pocket before handing the pack back. It slumps to the ground. The little girl carefully closes the zippers and, with considerable effort, slings the pack on to her back. She is already forgotten by the young soldier who has moved on to the next search. The tiny tot stumbles as she hurries to catch up with her friends.”

According to Funk, this ritual is a significant part of the girl's education: “to know her place.” Morning and afternoon, students

Photo by Johann Funk who helped negotiate the release of this young Palestinian detained at the military base at Beit Romano in the heart of Old Hebron. There are currently over 300 Palestinian children in Israeli prisons. Cover Shot - Lisa Talisnick with two of the Palestinian children she and her friends took on a hike to Lazarus's tomb in Bethany. Photo submitted.



like her negotiate up to three checkpoints to get to and from school. The checkpoints all have metal detectors. Some have turnstiles. The extent to which the checks are invasive depends on the orders soldiers receive. One day they might check every backpack; other days, none at all. This unpredictability, coupled with the fact that the searches often render them late for school, makes the children nervous.

Johann Funk and his colleagues in the Christian Peacemakers Team (www.cpt.org) also help to ensure the safety of Palestinian children harassed by settler youth who tend to moderate any violent behaviour if they are being observed. In extreme cases 'CPT-ers' try to create a diversion to give the Palestinian children time to reach safety. "It exposes us to risk," says Funk, "but the risk to the children would be greater if we did nothing." As most



(Above) Children of different nations learning rhythm with drumsticks in a music class run by volunteers in Palestine. Photo submitted. (Below) A Christian Peacemaker Team member (CPT-er) accompanies students through a field after settler youth blocked the only access road to a Palestinian neighbourhood. Photo by Johann Funk. (Next Page) Volunteers like Lisa Talisnick give more than swimming lessons to these children of Palestine. Photo submitted.



incidents occur near sensitive areas, soldiers are often present.

However they are forbidden to intervene when settler youth swarm Palestinian students.

Aware that he cannot change the severity of the occupation, let alone end it, Johann Funk watches, writes and prays that he contributes in some small way to the larger struggle.

Meanwhile, Jewish international journalist Lisa Talisnick, who regularly wrote for Vernon's Morning Star, left the Okanagan for her second home in Israel at the beginning of last year. She had intended to stay for two months but stayed ten, working with Palestinian children in a village called Al Walajeh on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

She and several friends started the All Nations Cafe there seven years ago. As its name implies, the All Nations Cafe brought Israeli and Palestinian children together - singing, dancing, playing and learning.

But the enterprise is threatened by the



extension of the separation wall that runs along Jerusalem's southern border, spanning Biblical sites from Bethlehem to Beit Sahur where "shepherds watched their flocks" and stretching east to Bethany where Lazarus rose from the dead. The wall's extension will make it illegal for the children to cross into forbidden territory to play with their former neighbours.

Talisnick sees in Palestinian youth the deep need to regain their sense of worth and community. So she helps Israeli, Palestinian and International instructors cross the border to conduct workshops, along with summer and winter camps, under the umbrella of Service and Peace in the Community (<http://service-for-peace-middle-east.blogspot.com/>).

"Once, in our music class, the kids heard some of us speaking Hebrew and asked if we'd teach it to them," says Talisnick. "So we did. That was an interesting development."

Another "interesting development" is the group's swimming program. Although the Mediterranean Sea is less than an hour's drive away, the Palestinian children Talisnick works with have never seen it. Restricted by the separation wall, poverty and large families unable to care for them, they have never gone swimming anywhere.

So Talisnick's group of volunteers bused 70 children to a pool eight kilometres from the refugee camp where they live. Once in the water, the excited youngsters begged for their turn to

learn to float: "Anna! Anna! Anna! Dori! Dori!" (Me! Me! Me! My turn! My turn!)

Talisnick recalls how, when they experienced the sensation of floating for the first time, they felt a kind of release that filled them with wonder.

The program is so successful that the team has now established lifeguard training for 15 teenage Palestinian girls - some from local refugee camps, others from a nearby orphanage. As fully-fledged lifeguards, they will be enabled to earn sufficient to put themselves through higher education and thus enhance their chances of escaping the bleak future that they currently face.

"It's as if the girls are swimming for their lives," says Lisa Talisnick who hopes to soon extend the program to include boys.

She shares Johann Funk's view that we may not be the centre of the solution but we might play a small part in changing these lives of the children of Palestine.

Visit <http://service-for-peace-middle-east.blogspot.com/> for more information about the lifeguard and swimming programs, and www.cpt.org for more information about the Christian Peacemakers Team.

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