



Old City Jerusalem

Fourth Station of the Cross

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Compiled from journal entries made from visits over the years

I'm at a Palestinian café called Pizzeria Basti across from the fourth Station of the Cross. This is on the Via Dolorosa in the Muslim quarter of the Old City, Occupied East Jerusalem. 2pm more or less.

I can order a sweet tea or coffee or a lime drink and some falafel. Outside tables.

The theater of the world passes in front of me. The owner will serve anyone including the enemy and friends of the enemy. Or, the enemy of the enemy. Everyone knows the old clichè about the Middle East? Remove the tourists in the Old City and particularly the Muslim Quarter where I am and it looks like Jesus & Co. and Roman legions could actually appear anytime.



To my right is the 5th Station T-shirt and tchotchke shop. You can get your olive wood camels and other Christian figurines. You can get yarmulkes "kippas" that say "Go Yankees" and "Go Mets" embroidered on the top.. You can get a T-shirt that says . "I Got Stoned In Israel" with a cheesy cartoon to match. And, there are lots of colorful Arab head coverings (kaffiyehs) hanging over the shop door.

At the cafe, I order a cold fresh squeezed lime drink and I sit here camera poised and journal ready at an outside table.

In front of me are large paving stones of marble. Large, random sizes, placed and replaced over the centuries, not fitted like the usual paving stones and walked on since the time of Jesus or before. Pilgrim and soldier footsteps have polished these marble stones for 2,000 years. One or two have chariot ruts worn into them but now arranged out of sequence. Seems, they have left the old paving stones in front of each Station of the Cross.



Passing by are some men dressed no differently than Jesus' time. Palestinian Muslims coming from prayers at the nearby Al Aqsa Mosque. Now, a parade of Christian monks. Now, Christian pilgrims following all the stations. Now, new rooftop settlers who have taken more and more possession in the Muslim Quarter.



To the left and up a bit is the empty tower building Ariel Sharon took and claimed. Large menorah on top. Closer are the steps of the Austrian hostel. Pilgrims, NGO activists and Israeli spies stay here on the cheap. A platoon of Israeli soldiers (IDF) are sitting on the steps. Cafe Au last uniforms, kinda shlumpy fitting. Many wear sunglasses and some are smoking cigarettes. One or two female soldiers. one Ethiopian Israeli soldier as well. All have assault weapons draped casually. Kinda Soldier Blasé. At the corner is the alley that descends from the Lions Gate entrance to the Old City and Stations One through Four of the Cross along the way.



Not far from the Second Station of the Cross is a shop that rents crosses to Christian Pilgrim groups making the whole Stations walk to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher higher up in the Christian Quarter. Rented crosses come in Three types. There is the heavy wooden, quite authentic version. The balsa wood version and the Styrofoam, wood veneered version. All, like Avis can be left at the destination to be returned by young Palestinian boys hired for the return job. At the same shop you can buy copy, knock off Greek Orthodox icons from a very convincing Palestinian Muslim shopkeeper. The shopkeeper sensing a trust with me offers the famous Palestinian gesture regarding the impossibility of the occupation and it's persistent humiliations.



Okay, there is a Christian group passing now. Mostly older women and their priest. Many wear matching sun hats that say something like *Ste. Teresa, Eglise. Liege, France* on the brim. One of the women carries a rented cross. Priest in the lead. They are praying now at the Fourth Station of the Cross. They will move on in a moment to the Fifth Station to my right. Very focused.



Look to my right in the shadows under the over-hang down what is called Al Wadi Street on the Via Dolorosa I see a group of young Palestinian kids. All boys, one girl. Their pockets are full and they appear to be lurking and shifting. But all looking this way. I learned that you break up stones to throwing size and fill your pockets just in case the Occupation soldiers create an arrest or otherwise harass some locals. Stone throwing time that would be. I go to them. My drink will hold my table. Some of the boys have sling shots. Both kinds. The David and Goliath kind and the more familiar Bronx kind. Nothing happening right now. Can break out in moments though. The edge of conflict seems to fit seamlessly between the normalcy of tourism, pilgrimage, spies and activists. Passing on the right are two armed beige shirted young Israeli guards who protect fore and aft some of the rooftop settlers coming and going through the Damascus Gate. Sometimes they are the same security that foreign Jewish families will engage braving their walk through the Muslim Quarter. They carry a long stock pistol Velcroed to the entire shooting arm. Guess that makes it kind of a rifle of sorts. The Settlers both Orthodox and secular have taken over more and more building roof tops in the Muslim Quarter in recent years.

Gonna write about the shield of fear and the shield of anonymity that almost everyone wears here. Including me.



The Old City has few regular vehicles in it. Narrow, steep, stepped alleyways. Except for special garbage collecting smaller tracker things there are the IDF jeeps that will rush through the wider corridors dumping out a platoon when necessary.

The platoon to my left seems to have mobilized into one of their jeeps. The vehicle is outfitted with caging on all windows to protect from the kids stones. I see the bouncing kind of tear gas canisters hanging on the jeep doors at the ready and I can see all this easily from my table. Second glass of lime drink. Owner, is undisturbed about a clash that may ensue in moments. The jeep races down Al Wadi Street past me. Turns around in front of me. The kids vanish.



There's a proscenium-stage aspect to this whole thing. Like a grand staged production with acting groups passing one another stage left and now stage right. Each group with its separate well practiced lines. Thinking an Israeli/Palestine West Side Story. Me, in the darkened front row audience participating in an observer way.

I wonder, if I knew nothing of the history of the Romans. The Jewish revolt. The Persians. The Crusaders. The Mamluks and the Ottomans would I somehow feel all that history sitting at this Palestinian cafe today. For me, this is the Old City in occupied East Jerusalem stage set and its players are the theater of all learning and life issues in one place. I want to share this moment of observed learning. Finished my second lime drink, pay in shekels and will be on my way.

