

## FROM OLIVE BRANCH TO OLIVE OIL

"You see that olive tree over there? In that olive tree you can see the Palestinian's past, present and future." Judeh Araj, President of the Beit Jala Olive Cooperative near Jerusalem, said as he pointed to a stand of ageless trees.

For millenia the olive and its by-products of olive oil and soap have dominated the economy and industry of Palestine. Olive orchards today occupy 30% of the cultivated land of the West Bank. Groves of gnarled trees, some as old as 1,000 years or more, cling to rocky, dry hillsides. Olive trees can survive with virtually no soil or water, their strong roots grasping onto boulders, and their leaves soaking moisture from the air.

In a land and a time in which water is the rarest and most valuable resource, cultivation of this sturdy tree plays a vital role. Wisdom about the care and maintenance of olive trees is passed down to each generation, but the trees grow and produce by a calendar of their own. The crop of olives fluctuates drastically from year to year, regardless of the amount of rainfall or fertilizer. It is said that olive trees will never have bad crops two years in a row, but they rarely have more than two good years in a

row either. Most often the crop yield rises and plunges on alternate years.

Although the olive tree can survive in a difficult climate with no help from man, it takes manpower, capital and equipment to get reliable production of olives and olive oil and wise use of its by-products. The large percentage of West Bank land occupied by olive groves today does not yield a comparably large percentage of the income of the area. West Bank olive farmers have suffered from competition from the cheaper Spanish olive oil available in Israel and the Occupied Territories, and from a lack of credit to invest in improvements in machinery to upgrade their cultivation. Discouraged by the difficulty of making a living from their crops, many farmers neglect the trees and seek employment elsewhere, often in Israel itself.

In the past few years, many ANERA projects have focused on increasing the production of olives and the development of facilities for processing, packing and selling olive oil and soap.

## CO-OPS REACH OUT

All of ANERA's olive cultivation and processing projects center on the agricultural cooperatives of the West Bank. The Occupied Territories have a long history of cooperative organization, dating back to the 1930's under the British mandate when the first cooperatives provided banking and credit services. Surviving the transitions from British rule to Jordanian to Israeli, cooperatives are the only Palestinian institutions available to West Bank farmers that can provide advice, equipment, marketing channels and credit.

ANERA funds help purchase equipment, provide the seed money for revolving credit to members, and cover costs for construction of new buildings. Cooperative members pay increased dues to help pay for these projects, and may also seek financial aid from other sources such as the Jordanian Cooperative Organization.

The following pages describe some of the ANERA projects with agricultural cooperatives that aim to increase productivity and income through the development of olive cultivation and processing. ANERA's efforts span the life of an olive from the first preparation of the land for planting trees to the final bottling of oil or processing of soap.



Long a symbol of peace, the olive tree is a familiar image in many ancient texts. In the book of Genesis, Noah learned that the flood waters had receded when a dove returned carrying an olive sprig. Jesus sought solace among the olive trees of the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his crucifixion. The Greek goddess, Athena, rewarded the Athenians with an olive tree for naming their city after her.

## CLEARING LAND IN TARQUMIYA

Southwest of Jerusalem in the poorest agricultural region of the West Bank, the village of Tarqumiya prospers or languishes with the fluctuations of the olive crop.

Tarqumiya is the home of a regional olive cooperative whose 800 members live in 15 surrounding villages. In the past, the primary function of the cooperative has been management of the olive press which squeezes olives to produce olive oil. But with partial help from ANERA funds, the Tarqumiya Cooperative last year began an ambitious plan to increase the quantity of cultivable land, and allow expansion of the olive orchards.

The land area encompassed by the Cooperative is about 113,000 acres. Of this, 61,000 acres were under some form of cultivation before the project began. The initial target of the land reclamation program is 27,000 acres. Some of these are currently being tilled but show a low productivity, and some were tilled in the past but were abandoned because of their low quality. By purchasing five tractors and one bulldozer, the Cooperative is helping farmers level and clear this land for new trees. The increased acreage and larger number of trees creates a cushion so that in bad crop years farmers will be able to survive. Extension of the orchards also has long-range environmental benefits. Olive trees hold topsoil and attract and retain moisture, which helps stay the encroachment of the desert.

## RAISING TREES IN HEBRON

The Hebron/Bethlehem Regional Plant Nursery Cooperative plans to construct a temperature-controlled greenhouse that will raise olive tree and other seedlings for sale to the anticipated 700 coop members and other farmers in the region.

Demand for olive seedlings exceeds the supply on the West Bank for several reasons. Currently only one nursery on the West Bank raises olive seedlings which, because of the demand, are very expensive. Seedlings are available through limited Israeli sources, but are raised for slightly different soils and elevations in Israel which are not suitable to the conditions in the West Bank. Finally, the increased acreage created through land reclamation projects coupled with the need to hold back the encroachment of the desert by planting more trees have enhanced the seedling demand.

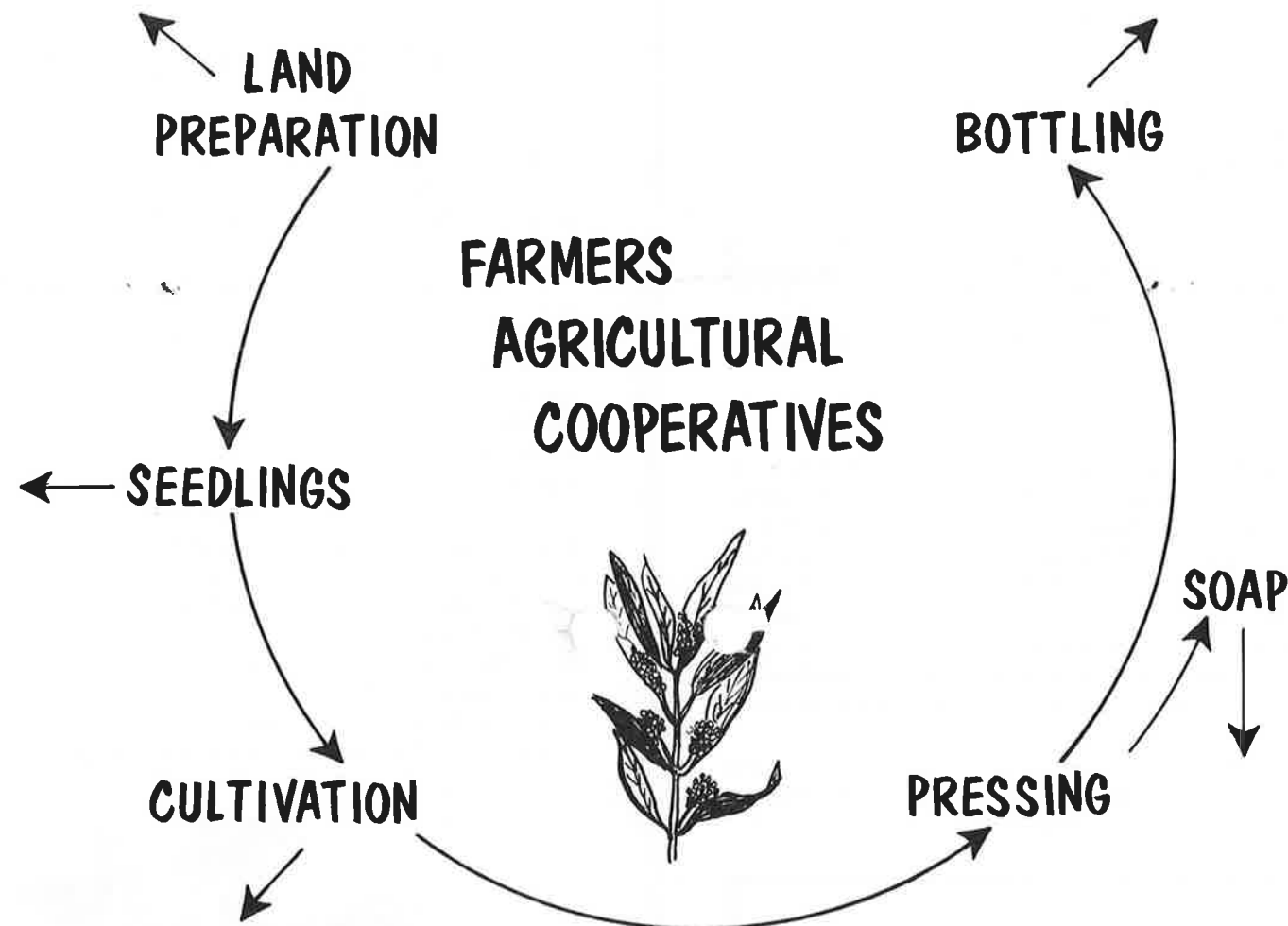
Funded jointly by ANERA and Coop members, the greenhouse will raise 180,000 olive seedlings each year and sell them for about half the current price. This rate of production will enable Coop members and other farmers to replace dead or non-productive trees in active orchards, and to expand orchards into newly reclaimed land.

## BUYING TRACTORS IN BETHLEHEM

Tractors, plows, sprayers, threshers and cultivators—this is equipment that every farmer needs, but often lacks, in the West Bank. Six small cooperatives with a combined membership of 162 families in the Bethlehem/Hebron region will purchase this machinery with the partial help of ANERA funding this year.

Lack of mechanization is a primary reason for low productivity and low income from farming, which in turn cause farmers to leave the land and seek work elsewhere. The six coops will make the new equipment available to all farmers in the area, both members and non-members of the coops. In concert with the land reclamation and seedling projects in the Hebron area, the use of modern farming machinery will be one more step toward enhanced use of agricultural land, and improved farmer income.

In the past two years, ANERA has raised funds for nine agricultural cooperatives in the West Bank for projects encompassing many levels of olive cultivation and processing. The projects described here represent five aspects of work related to olives—from improving the land quality for farming to packaging and marketing the final products.



## BOTTLING OIL IN EIN SINYEH

Over 600 members of the Ein Sinyeh Olive Cooperative north of Ramallah will be able to bottle their own olive oil when their new bottling plant, this year's project, is built and equipped. Founded in 1964, the Cooperative has offered three services to its members: providing agricultural machinery and services, pressing and processing olive oil, and marketing olives and oil. Because of the increasing difficulty of marketing oil on the West Bank and abroad, the Coop decided to build its own facilities.

Several obstacles impede the sale of locally produced olive oil. Fluctuating crop yields make it difficult for bottling plants to maintain business. In a bad year, not enough olive oil is produced to keep them going; while in a good year too much is produced to be bottled and sold with limited facilities. For example, in 1976, olive oil production in the West Bank topped 15,000 tons, 7,000 more than what could be sold. The following year, just over 3,000 tons were produced, leaving the market short by 3,000.

Prior to the Israeli Occupation of the West Bank, the Jordanian government regulated the quantity and quality of the surplus West Bank oil that was sold in Jordan and abroad. Since occupation and the removal of Jordanian regulation, surplus West Bank oil has been bought cheaply by merchants, adulterated with lower quality oil (residue from the second stage of pressing or inexpensive imports), and sold in Jordan as the supposedly highly prized virgin oil. Lacking regulatory control to prevent this practice, the Jordanian government for a number of years prohibited the import of West Bank oil into Jordan, or its export to other Arab countries via Jordan.

Olive oil is traditionally sold in 18 kilogram tins to suit the demands of farming families who earn their total annual income at one time and buy food staples in bulk quantities. The decline in agricultural productivity in the Occupied Territories prompted increasing numbers of farmers to seek employment as wage earners and consumer demands changed. Wage earners tend to buy in smaller quantities that are cheaper and more convenient. Small bottles of olive oil are currently only available for the imported Italian and Spanish oils.

The Ein Sinyeh Cooperative expects to start by bottling its own 250 ton surplus, and later to bottle surplus oil from neighboring cooperatives at Beit Jala and Deir Qaddis. This will accomplish two things: provide the small 650 gram bottles the consumer wants, and guarantee that the bottle contains unadulterated virgin oil. Discussions have already been held with Jordanian authorities to reopen markets for surplus West Bank oil. The assured sale of surplus oil at competitive prices will help the Coop and other farmers survive lean years, and earn back their investment in the bottling equipment and building. ANERA funds are helping with approximately half of the initial cost.

## MAKING SOAP IN BEIT JALA

Soap manufacture until now has been largely confined to the northern section of the West Bank in the town of Nablus, which gives its name to the popular, inexpensive green bars called "Nabulsi". This spring a new soap factor will be started farther south by the Beit Jala Olive Cooperative near Bethlehem to use the oil of that region.

Besides producing the traditional Nabulsi type soap, the Beit Jala facility will be the first factory in the Occupied Territories to manufacture a fine quality toilet soap from olive oil. Like the Nabulsi soap, the Beit Jala toilet soap will use jift oil, the residue oil squeezed from the pulpy remains after olive pressing, as a base; this will be enhanced with another form of fat as well.

The Beit Jala project offers immediate advantages to farmers and consumers alike. About 700 members and 2,300 non-members who use the Beit Jala Cooperative will benefit from the sale of their jift oil, which until now has been wasted because of the lack of facilities for making soap. The Coop in turn will be able to expand its services and pass along profits to members. Finally, the new soap industry will offer a less expensive toilet soap comparable to the currently available imports.



Former ANERA Board Chairman, Evan M. Wilson, has written a new book, Decision on Palestine—How the U.S. Came to Recognize Israel. This excellent book is based on archival sources and on Mr. Wilson's firsthand experience when he served on the Palestine Desk of the State Department from 1942-1948. Copies of the book may be ordered through local bookstores or from the publisher: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, Stanford, California.

Most olive cultivation on the West Bank is "dry farming", that is, farming without irrigation in areas of low rainfall. Olive trees are normally planted between 20 and 30 feet apart, the distance determined partly by the amount of water available (less water necessitates a greater distance). The absence of irrigation therefore reduces the density of the orchards.

## OLIVE SEASONS

The cultivation cycle of the olive begins in the fall, after the harvest. Farmers first plow the orchards and prune the full trees to an umbrella shape to permit the maximum amount of sunlight to reach the inner branches. With the first rainfall of the season, young saplings are transplanted from the nurseries into the plowed orchards.

West Bank farmers cultivate both black and green olives. Within each species are found two kinds of trees—those that produce a plump fruit, referred to as "female" by the West Bank farmers, and those that produce a lean fruit, the "male". The region is also populated by a wild variety of olive tree which doesn't produce a tasty fruit but is valued by the farmers for its strength. In early winter, sprigs of the young "female" trees are grafted to the

trunks of the wild olives. This way the farmer hopes to produce a strong tree that will yield a juicy, plump olive.

By the spring, masses of tiny white, fragrant flowers cluster on all of the branches of the trees. Only 15% of these flowers survive to produce olives, which begin to appear in the early summer. Entire families pitch in for the harvesting of the hard green olives in the early fall. About 5% of the annual crop is pickled and eaten as table olives. The rest are taken to the olive press to be squeezed for oil, after which the pithy remains may be pressed again to extract inedible oil for soap production.

The growth of the olive tree is both the symbolic and real future of the Palestinians. It represents the hope for peace, and the work for prosperity.

Enclosed is a special gift for growing olives in the Occupied Territories.

\_\_\_\_\_ \$15                  \_\_\_\_\_ \$25                  \_\_\_\_\_ \$50                  \_\_\_\_\_ \$100                  \_\_\_\_\_ \$500                  \_\_\_\_\_ \$1000

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY, STATE, ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Contributions to ANERA are tax-deductible and should be sent with this form to the ANERA office. Thank you for your help.

*This issue of the ANERA Newsletter was written by Lucy Brown, ANERA's Executive Assistant; photos by Dagny Svien.*

# ANERA

1522 K Street, N.W., #202  
Washington, D.C. 20005

AMERICAN NEAR EAST REFUGEE AID  
FROM OLIVE BRANCH TO OLIVE OIL

Nonprofit Organization  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Permit No. 46530  
Washington, D.C.

ADDRESS CORRECTION  
REQUESTED & RETURN  
POSTAGE GUARANTEED