

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

For many, the name “Bethlehem” conjures up an ancient, other-worldly place, a greeting card town of starry nights and snowy rooftops. Inhabited by some 20,000 people, Bethlehem lies just south of Jerusalem on the West Bank. Ten percent of all Palestinians are Christians and Bethlehem is one of several West Bank towns where the majority of the population is Christian. Although it is a small town, its pivotal role in Christianity has made it internationally famous. It is the site of the Church of the Nativity, the oldest Church in Christendom and holy to Christians as the birthplace of Jesus Christ.

The romantic phrases of the hymn “O, Little Town of Bethlehem” refer to its “deep and dreamless sleep.” While this provides an inspirational theme for many worshipers, it does not describe the actual daily lives of the Palestinians who live, work, and raise their children there. Old and steeped in tradition, Bethlehem is also a town where people face modern social, political, and personal problems. This issue of the newsletter focuses on ANERA’s various projects in and around Bethlehem, and the ways in which they address some of these modern-day problems.

In order to better understand Bethlehem today, we can look at the lives of some of the Palestinians who live and work there — the farmers, students and homemakers whom the ANERA staff has come to know. The following sketches of Hilwe, Munir, and Mohammad are representations of the actual lives led by many West Bank Palestinians.

Hilwe is a Palestinian woman from a prominent West Bank family, known for its work in the field of education. Hilwe’s family has lived in the West Bank for many generations. Due to her education and background, she is in a position to help her hometown and its people. One outlet for her concern is the Bethlehem Arab Women’s Union, begun in 1947. Such organizations are active throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip as well as the Arab World. They provide a forum for women who are willing to work with others in an organizational setting and have interests outside their immediate families. The goals of the Women’s Unions are to raise the educational, cultural, social, and health care status of women and their families. The Union Hilwe joined performs many such functions for the community.

Hilwe and her coworkers realized that Bethlehem’s unique role as a center for tourists and pilgrims gave the organization certain options and obligations. The group opened a museum featuring an exhibit of nineteenth century Bethlehem life, including traditional clothing and artifacts. The museum shop sells materials produced through the Women’s Handicraft Workshop, another project of the Union. Here women perfect sewing and embroidery skills that allow them to earn an income while they work at home.

An innovative School of Fine Arts and Crafts was initiated in 1976 with ANERA’s help. The school trains talented young people in sculpture and woodcarving, as well as drawing, painting, and other crafts. The Women’s Union felt the quality of such products had fallen as the number of tourists had increased. Training skilled artists for the marketplace in Bethlehem has proved a successful endeavor. A measure of the success of the Women’s Union is the recent opening of their new Museum of Palestinian Culture and Handicrafts. The ceremonial opening of the new expanded museum was presided over by the Mayor of Bethlehem, Elias Freij, a strong supporter of the work of both the Arab Women’s Union and ANERA.



Manger Square and the Church of the Nativity.



A good education makes it possible for Palestinian youth to lead productive lives.

In the area of education, the Women's Union has many undertakings. In 1976, they established a school for the mentally retarded to provide basic skills and teach simple crafts. At Bethlehem University a few students are given scholarship assistance while others can draw interest free loans. Needy families can receive help with elementary school fees, and literacy classes for women are offered.

A usual concern of women's organizations is mother-child health care and Hilwe's Bethlehem organization is no exception. The Women's Union provides medical assistance to expectant and nursing mothers and young children. Food for poor families is also distributed. This complex and growing agenda of the Bethlehem Arab Women's Union has been aided by small annual grants from ANERA.

Hilwe's active participation and leadership in the Union has also led her to participate in another group — the Bethlehem Societies Committee for Rehabilitation and Development. This organization was formed in 1968 by community leaders to foster economic and social improvements in Bethlehem. Six charitable agencies joined forces, including Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, and Protestant voluntary organizations, as well as the Union itself. Their cooperation has resulted in two innovative projects which ANERA has aided.

In 1977, with a grant from ANERA, the Bethlehem Committee opened a metal works training center. Like the School of Fine Arts and Crafts, this project relies on Bethlehem's role as an attraction to tourists and pilgrims. A one year training program was set up to teach students design, use of materials, and marketing techniques for the production of religious and souvenir items in silver and other metals. Both traditional and modern methods of design are employed. Bethlehem has over thirty shops where the items can be marketed. When the training center was opened, most devotional and tourist items were produced abroad, in West Germany or Hong Kong. This program was exciting to Hilwe and the others of the committee because it allowed a skill still alive in the community to be developed and then put to productive use by the graduates of the course. ANERA's assistance to this project covered a two year start-up period where we helped the center obtain the space for operation, staff, and equipment.

A second practical project the Bethlehem Societies Committee has initiated is a revolving loan program. Profits from the work of the metal work training center help to sustain this loan fund, which provides interest free loans to

small businessmen, craftspeople, and farmers. The loans do not exceed \$500 but allow these workers to buy the necessary tools, equipment, and livestock to get a start. Then, as the worker becomes established, the loan is paid off over a two year period. The money is then available to another in need of aid. This well-managed fund is of great use to various people in the community. ANERA has been pleased to help this consortium of the major religious and civic agencies by annually supporting the revolving loan fund.

Hilwe's civic spiritedness in the face of the needs of her community reminds us that volunteerism knows no national boundaries. She is one of many committed Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and in her commitment she is similar to many Americans who work through local organizations for the betterment of their communities.

Hilwe's work has brought her into contact with many less fortunate than she, in and around Bethlehem. One such person is Munir, a little boy who lives with his family at Dheisheh camp. Dheisheh is a Palestinian refugee camp located on the road between Bethlehem and Hebron. It was set up to house refugees from the 1948 war who no longer had homes or land to which they could return. The health care and education needs of the population at Dheisheh are the responsibility of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency). AMER, ANERA's medical division, has assisted UNRWA with donations of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies. In 1984, AMER was able to give nearly \$450,000 in hospital and clinic supplies for use in UNRWA facilities throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Dheisheh camp has a history of conflict with the occupation authorities, often due to disturbances on the main road just outside the camp. Tensions are frequently high, making it difficult for children to apply themselves to school work. But Munir has a favorite uncle who teaches elementary school and he hopes to go to Bethlehem University to train to be a teacher himself. Without the growth of Palestinian



Bethlehem's mayor, Elias Freij, at the opening of the new Museum of Palestinian Culture and Handicrafts.

Universities in the 1970's. Munir's academic options would be limited. Advanced studies would have required leaving the West Bank. However, in 1973, three American Christian Brothers were assigned by Pope Paul VI to administer a new university. While operated by a Catholic teaching order, Bethlehem University is designed to educate all without regard to creed. The small campus is located on a hill in Bethlehem where students can undertake studies in Liberal Arts, Science, and Business Administration. A two year Hotel Management program is also available. The Christian Brothers and the faculty wish to contribute to the effectiveness of the entire West Bank educational system and so have included a community education planning program, including an in-service program for teachers.

The language of instruction is Arabic. ANERA has helped the University through several book donations in Arabic and English for the library. A scholarship fund has also been supplemented with ANERA donations. Munir aspires to maintain good grades and thus be eligible for a scholarship one day.

Had Munir not been academically oriented, other options would have been open to him, thanks to the work of other charitable agencies. In the important area of vocational training, the Salesian Vocational Training Center has been in operation in Bethlehem since 1863. It was opened by a Catholic priest who saw the utility of training young boys in the local art of olive wood and mother of pearl craftmaking. The Roman Catholic order of the Salesians took over operation of the school in 1891 when the work became too much for one man. The school now provides a basic academic program in the morning and vocational training in the afternoon. The students, both Muslim and Christian, come from all over the West Bank to be trained by the Salesian fathers in various trades. These include carpentry, welding, electronics, electrical wiring, and tailoring. Students from needy families pay a nominal fee or none at all for the education, which provides them with a marketable skill. Over the years, ANERA's grant has been used to purchase equipment, like lathes and drills, to cover the salary of a specialized instructor, or to provide scholarships for additional students. Like Bethlehem University, the Salesian school helps Palestinians like Munir learn skills that allow them to continue living in their own towns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In the nearby village of Wadi Fokin lives a farmer named Mohammad. His village is one that has been hard hit by conflict — its boundaries were diminished by two-thirds in the 1948 war. Like many other West Bank farmers, Mohammad found farming his land to be increasingly less productive and less profitable. The main reason for this was a shortage of the agricultural machinery needed for cultivation and land reclamation. Farmers could only cultivate a portion of their land. Mohammad's sons were forced to seek employment outside the West Bank. Wadi Fokin saw fifty percent of its remaining farmland lie fallow and the per capita income drop to less than \$200 per year.

Mohammad was one of the founding members of the village's agricultural cooperative in 1976. Through joint efforts, the farmers sought to improve the conditions. A major breakthrough came in 1981, when, with the help of a grant from ANERA, the farmers were able to purchase the appropriate machinery. This included field tractors, ploughs, cultivators, and water tanks and sprayers. A grind mill, which is pulled and operated by a tractor and mills grain for household consumption, was also purchased. This additional piece of machinery saves the farmers from having to travel great distances to have their grain milled, or from



This olive seedling nursery is operated by a West Bank farmer's cooperative.

having to use the services of an expensive middleman. It gives the families greater local control over their own lives.

The advantages of these machines for the 162 member families of the cooperative and the rest of the village farmers have been great, allowing farmers like Mohammad to keep their families intact and working the land.

Many limitations face the farmers of the West Bank and Gaza. Another example of ANERA's assistance in economic development is to be found in the Bethlehem suburb of Beit Jala. There, ANERA has assisted an olive press cooperative that was founded in 1965 by about one dozen members. Currently, membership has increased to about seven hundred. Members come from Bethlehem, Hebron, and Jerusalem and use the cooperative's facilities to press their olive oil.

ANERA has assisted the cooperative by helping them set up a modern soap factory. One of the components of the soap is derived from "jift" — a byproduct of the olive oil pressing process which contains an industrial grade olive oil. Consumer interest in soap made from this residue is great in the Arab world and the cooperative produces it along with edible oil in their own pressing facility. Hi-tech soap processing machinery has been installed. An economy soap is now being produced and a fancy toilet soap will be added to the product line. Both soaps are desired commodities on the West Bank, replacing imported products of inferior quality.

ANERA has undertaken a second major project in Beit Jala to assist its economic development. Here we have helped the municipality in the construction of a light industry center. This new center, the first of its type in the area, will house many small industrial service garages and shops. The advantages of the project are both short and long term. In the near term, residents of Beit Jala will have readily accessible services in a better facility. Businesses will be moved to the zoned industrial area away from the residential areas where they have been scattered, contributing to pollution and traffic congestion. In the long term, the municipality will be able to keep businesses in its tax base, providing the municipality with adequate income for services for its residents.

The industrial center, which will house the shops of metal mechanics, carpenters, furniture makers, blacksmiths, metal workers, stone cutters, iron mongers, and food processors, will help meet the development goals of Beit Jala without causing environmental damage.

Like the other development projects mentioned above,



ANERA provided part of the funding necessary for the completion of the project. In each case, the municipality and the cooperatives provided more than one half of the funds themselves, demonstrating their ability to operate without undue dependency on any outside source.

ANERA is proud to contribute to the welfare of the "Little Town of Bethlehem." This town, famous throughout the world as the place where Christ was born, still lives. A visitor to Bethlehem can see the manger, Church of the Nativity, shops filled with souvenirs from the Holy Land, and the Arab Womens Union's museum featuring Palestinian artifacts and handicrafts. If the tourist has the time, he or she may become acquainted with the people, such as Munir in the Palestinian refugee camp, Mohammad, farming his village lands, or Hilwe volunteering her services to the community. The tourist will find that these Palestinians of Bethlehem are all seeking to live normal lives as well as working towards the attainment of a just peace in this, the Holy Land, which deserves peace.

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This issue of the ANERA Newsletter was written by Janice Murphy, ANERA Vice-President

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