Resisting the Occupation with Olive Oil

by Miriam Garfinkle

“Zatoun,” a fair trade olive oil that has been imported from the West Bank (Palestine) to Canada, has just celebrated its tenth year this April. (Zatoun means olive in Arabic.)

I first met Robert Massoud, founder of Zatoun, at an anti-Iraq war demonstration in 2004, introduced by my friend Smadar Carmon, who later became the volunteer coordinator for Zatoun. Robert told me about the idea of selling fair trade Palestinian olive oil in Canada, and showed me some promotional material he had prepared. I don’t remember when I first tasted the oil, but know that I was really in love with the taste. It was so fresh and authentic. I also loved the bottle’s design: the olive branch, the earth and sky, and a Palestinian flag. The idea really captured me, as it was supportive of fair trade for Palestinians. What I also understand more fully now is its role in resistance to ethnic cleansing. Olive trees are at the heart of Palestinian culture, sustenance and economy.

Nahil Aweidah, a Palestinian woman, expresses this (from the Zatoun website):

“I am sure olive oil was the first thing I felt and maybe smelled the minute I was born. Khayeh Boer, the Jewish midwife who helped my mother deliver me, took me directly and rubbed olive oil into my skin, as was the custom throughout our land. The olive tree is an evergreen tree that gives shade when farmers till the land. It lives longer than the other trees in the area. You can hear old men saying, “This olive tree is rominyeh,” meaning it was planted during the Roman occupation. Ramallah, my second home from 1949-1967, was surrounded with terraced hills full of fig trees, olive trees and grape vines. Those hills are now lost to Israeli settlements and roads. Before, all families owned olive trees in ample amounts for their daily meals and other uses.

The fair trade co-operative that the oil comes from is called the Palestine Fair Trade Association (PFTA), which is the largest fair trade producers’ union in Palestine, with over 1700 Palestinian farmers joined in fair trade collectives and cooperatives across the West Bank.

I became one of three first signing officers for Zatoun to become registered as a non-profit organization called “The Palestine Peace Awareness Inc.” Its main basis of support was and remains through churches and a unique model of “depots” which spread throughout Canada. These are mostly at homes from which people sell the oil or distribute it to other churches or groups. This is an activist-based rather than a business model approach, and it implies a certain amount of trust as people would mostly get the oil delivered and then pay later as they sold it. Although complicated, and a bit messy to set up at first, it works and also creates an amazing network. For example, Mary, who comes from Picton to Toronto, frequently picks up a few cases from me and delivers to Andrea and also Michael in Prince Edward County. Michael sells and also gets the oil to Hedy, who lives in the country near Belleville, and who has regular customers in that area.

This network of people meeting over the oil opens a space for discussion and relationships, and also leads to connections amongst like-minded, activist-minded people who often link up in many different social justice related issues not limited to Israel-Palestine. Beit Zatoun (“House of Zatoun”) in Toronto, now five years old, sells the oil and related products and is an extremely vibrant cultural and political venue for many Palestinian and social justice related groups.

The oil is also used as a basis for education. Many hours have been spent at fair trade shows talking about the situation in Palestine to those who had no idea about it before. We have also gone into schools, mosques and churches. Sampling the oil works extremely well as a conversation opener and makes the discussion more tangible.

Larger retail organizations like Ten Thousand Villages, as well as organic food stores and food co-operatives, have also started selling the oil throughout Canada. A local independent grocery store near me sells about 50 bottles per month now.

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Zatoun, through its sales, also contributes money for planting young olive trees. In 2005 Zatoun in Canada partnered with the PFTA to create “Trees for Life” to help farmers recover from the enormous destruction of olive trees by Israeli settlers and the Israeli army, including devastating losses to the illegal Annexation Wall. The goal was to provide individual farmers with 25 to 50 olive tree saplings. The program aims to serve farmers in greatest need: farmers who have had trees destroyed or lost access to land; small farmers with not enough trees to sustain their family; farms headed by women who own land or have had husbands killed or imprisoned, and young starter farmers who have inherited or acquired land. From its first full year in 2005, the program has planted a total of almost 70,000 trees to benefit over 1,500 farming families.

For ten years, Zatoun has also consistently contributed to a children and youth project in Nablus (West Bank) called Project Hope, which invites international volunteers to join Palestinian volunteers and staff. It runs programs in the arts, English, French and computer skills, for children living in the city, refugee camps and surrounding villages in the impoverished city of Nablus.

There is great harm potential of most NGOs in Palestine to undermine the economy and create dependency.

Jeremy Wildeman, co-founder of Project Hope and a PhD candidate doing his thesis on the foreign aid of NGOs in Palestine, applauds the work of Zatoun and similar organizations as one of the best ways to support the Palestinian economy by investing in the people and their needs and livelihood. He feels that Zatoun helps to sustain families and an economy that has been rapidly de-developing under brutal occupation and as a result of the Oslo peace plan. Further, Zatoun also promotes a positive dialogue for peaceful coexistence. Fair trade cooperatives based on the traditional economy of olive oil renew social values and ties that are purposely weakened by the occupation. Supporting Zatoun must work hand in hand, of course, with other efforts such as BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) to end the occupation and bring a just solution to the Palestinian situation.

Working for Zatoun has been one of the most sustainable activism that I have ever done. I have a very busy depot, apparently “the” busiest, and I have had to make my partner Ulli a deputy to keep up! Shlepping boxes from the basement and pulling two boxes every two weeks to the local grocery store on a wagon has become part of my regular routine, which I have done through sickness and health, and will continue to do as long as it is needed and I have the strength.