

"We call occupying the land 'establishing facts' "

"Pioneering" on the West Bank

BY GRACE HALSELL

The United States has maintained consistently since the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 that Jewish settlements on lands inhabited by Palestinian Arabs are illegal, and in June, 1980, legislation was proposed that would deduct a portion of American aid that goes to pay for such illegal settlements.

Senator Adlai Stevenson of Illinois proposed withholding \$150 million of economic support, saying "That amount reflects a conservative estimate of what the Israeli Government is spending annually on its West Bank settlements." Stevenson, in his address on the floor of the U.S. Senate, added it would be "a small deduction from the two billion dollars the United States sends annually." Israel receives almost as much military and economic assistance from the U.S. as does all the rest of the world. "To say the least," he continued, "it does not reflect a balanced consideration of U.S. interests in the world to earmark almost half of all U.S. security assistance for less than one-tenth of one percent of the world's people."

For a year I lived among the Palestinian Arabs on the West Bank and I learned that many of the illegal Israeli settlements are being spearheaded by newly arrived Jewish immigrants from the United States. Two such immigrants are Bobby and Linda Brown.

Linda, twenty-two, is tall, strong-willed, and sharp of mind. She grew up in Yonkers, New York, and earned a degree in physical therapy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. A third-generation American, Linda told me her parents seldom went to synagogue, did not keep kosher, and did not object when her brother married a Gentile. They were in the mainstream—"assimilated," Linda said.

"College changed my life," she recounts. There, friends persuaded her to join a Zionist youth movement. The Zionists gave her a ticket to visit Israel and there she met Bobby Brown—about thirty, bearded, and somewhat soft-spoken—who had earned a master's degree in education at the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University. Like Linda, he was in Israel with a Zionist youth group.

They returned to America, got married, and

"shocked" their parents by announcing they were emigrating to Israel. (They now hold two passports, Israeli and American.) In Israel, Linda and Bobby joined the extremist Bloc of the Faithful, or Gush Emunim, and, armed with submachine guns and protected by Israeli soldiers, moved by helicopter at night, along with fifteen other couples, onto 750 acres of land on the outskirts of Bethlehem. The region has been predominantly Arab for several hundred years, and farmers continue to grow wheat, olives, and grapes as they did in the days of Christ. The settlers called their new outpost Tekoa.

A government official helped arrange my first visit to Tekoa. He telephoned Bobby Brown, and Bobby said he and Linda would pick me up in Jerusalem and take me home with them. Linda was at the wheel with their year-old daughter, Geula, strapped up front beside her. Bobby and I and a week's supply of groceries were in the back. We drove south from Jerusalem, and within minutes I caught a glimpse of Bethlehem in the distance. We passed no signs indicating we were leaving Israel. Yet almost immediately we were in the controversial sector of historic Palestine now called simply the West Bank.

The West Bank, west of the Jordan River, is only slightly larger than the state of Delaware. It extends a mere eighty miles from north to south; its east-west boundaries lie up to thirty-four miles from the Jordan and as little as nine miles from the Mediterranean.

We were driving in the highlands, a broad ridge of hills and mountains that extend from the Hebron area in the south to Jenin in the north, passing through Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Nablus. Along the way Brown explained why he had left a well-paying job in New York to come to this ancient land and join a heavily armed group of civilians that says war is not too high a price to pay for the West Bank.

"Gush Emunim is not a movement where you go into an office, sign up, get a membership card, and then pay dues," said Brown. The Gush was established, with Israeli Government approval, specifically to move Jewish settlers onto land now inhabited exclusively by Palestinian Arabs. Its followers believe Israel owns, on the promise of God, not only the half of Palestine that was allocated by the United Nations in 1947, but also that portion of Palestine it conquered and has occupied militarily since 1967. This includes Arab East Jerusalem and the West Bank, territories formerly under Jordanian rule; and the Gaza Strip, a hundred-mile strip of

Grace Halsell spent a year in the Middle East living with Jewish settlers on the West Bank, with an Arab family, and a Christian family. Her journey to Jerusalem is scheduled by Macmillan for spring publication.

land that faces the Mediterranean, formerly under Egyptian rule.

IN TEKOA

Linda and Bobby call themselves "pioneers" and believe themselves no different from those who, in the 1920s and 1930s, settled in the choice coastal sections of historic Palestine and began the struggle that resulted in the establishment of Israel in 1948. To Bobby the creation of Israel was only the first phase of an ongoing struggle for land. He sees his form of Zionism, dedicated to expelling Arabs from the West Bank and other occupied territories and replacing them with Jews, "as moral, as idealistic" as the early Zionism that expelled the British from Palestine. "Tekoa," asserts Bobby Brown, "is as important as Tel Aviv."

As twilight turned to darkness we continue our drive through the Judean hills, past an Arab village called Rifida. Then I spot Tekoa, a collection of half a dozen prefabricated structures behind barbed-wire fences, illuminated by high-powered searchlights.

Linda stops at a security guardhouse. A uniformed, armed Israeli soldier approaches and checks our identity. We drive inside and park alongside other cars. Linda unbuckles Geula and Bobby and I cart groceries into their two-bedroom, prefabricated house, still cluttered with unopened boxes of electrical appliances from the United States.

That evening over supper—we've each made our own peanut butter and jelly sandwiches—we talk about the first Jewish colony on the West Bank. In 1967 a group of Israeli settlers moved into a former army camp on the West Bank, fenced off a parcel of land, and called their new home *Kafr Etzion*. Meanwhile, displaced Palestinian farmers in *Ain Yabrud* said the settlers had confiscated sixty-five acres of land they had farmed for generations.

What about the claims of those Palestinian farmers? I ask. "Possession is nine-tenths of the law," Brown replies. "We call occupying the land 'establishing facts.'" By allowing the first colony to stand in 1967, the Israeli Government provided a clear indication of its intentions in the occupied territories.

That evening six settlers and I sit under the stars with the flickering lights of neighboring Arab villages around us. In the circle are Linda and Bobby, Elie and Leah Birnbaum of Brooklyn, and Howard and Barbara Ginsburg of Long Island. Of the fifteen families in Tekoa, seven are from the United States. All the men carry submachine guns.

"Guns," Bobby says, "are something people have to live with here. We will carry arms as long as we are in a situation where there are forces that want to kill Jewish people." He did not say that by moving into Arab land he himself might be creating "forces" that would want to kill Jewish people.

A sentry, David Rokeah, passes on his rounds. "Sit awhile," Bobby suggests, and David, a fourth-generation Israeli, draws up a chair beside me, takes his rifle from his shoulder and holds it close to his right side. All his life, he says, he has been "a fighter." He joined the Israeli underground movement called the *Irgun* to fight the British when he was thirteen, and for the rest

of his life he has lived with a gun at hand. The Jews, he states, "must keep fighting."

Each Tekoa family supports itself, and they pass the laws that govern them. Elie Birnbaum, a psychologist, reports he is thrilled with how democracy works at the grass roots. "I guess if the meetings when the Constitution was adopted were like ours, the Founding Fathers must have been funny to watch. Here people yell and jump and we all have our own ideas. You may fight for three hours about where to string a clothesline. Living here reminds me of what America was like two hundred years ago. Here you have the spirit of just starting, of being a pioneer."

One day, washing dishes, Linda talks of her life. In answer to why she has chosen to occupy by force a land owned by Arabs, she says only that she is a "pioneer"—and everyone knows pioneers struggle and sacrifice. As she uses the word "pioneer" I can see a TV, stereo, radio, washing machine, electric stove, and, parked outside, an automobile. Still, there is much she does not have: a grocery store, a pharmacy, a shopping center, a museum, library, theatre, opera, bank. Not to mention that greatest of all conveniences, a telephone.

"We immediately liked Tekoa," Brown has said. "It looked like a place where we could have an impact, as well as start a nice, new life." But while Linda stays at home all day, Bobby is almost never in Tekoa. He is typical of most male settlers, who say they need the outposts for "security" reasons but commute to work each day to either Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, about an hour's drive.

Bobby works for the Jewish Agency, which gets most of its money from the United States and is the official agency that sponsors settlements like Tekoa. Ginsburg, who ran a Long Island dry cleaning business for twenty-five years, also commutes to Jerusalem, where he manages a food store.

One evening I ask the settlers how they define the boundaries of the Greater Israel they hope to create.

"There are many interpretations and disputes about where exactly the boundaries are," Bobby begins. "The one thing that is indisputable is that Judea and Samaria [biblical names for the West Bank area] were the heart of the Jewish homeland." Bobby argues that if Jews cannot settle on the West Bank, "this will become the only place on earth from which Jews are banned."

"We believe it is important for Jews to live in our own land, in Judea and Samaria," Ginsburg says. And as if to reassure himself, he adds: "We were promised all of this land by God."

His wife, Barbara, a housewife and mother in New York for a quarter-century, breaks in to ask: "Were we promised Jordan too?"

Ginsburg replies that, "Yes, we were promised Jordan," and he says more: "It is filled with bedouins and has a king. All of a sudden it has become a major state in the Middle East....God forbid I have to give up my land to such a country."

"The term *Palestinian*," Bobby points out, "once meant Jews and Arabs alike. Palestine was a League of Nations mandate ruled by the British. And when England withdrew, the Jews established Israel. But now when people say, 'There should be a Palestinian state,'

they are talking about a Palestinian Arab state. And for all intents and purposes, that already exists in Jordan. More than half the population of Jordan is Palestinian; the other half is bedouin. So when Arabs think they should have a second state on the West Bank, we disagree."

I ask where the Palestinians will go if Israelis take all of Gaza and the West Bank.

"That is an Arab problem," Bobby replies. The Israeli Government gives two reasons as justification for moving Jewish civilians onto Arab land. First, the government states that the Jewish settlers utilize only state lands and do not displace Palestinian Arab farms. The Palestinians say this is not true. In one case Jewish settlers confiscated land near Nablus to establish a colony called Elon Moreh. Palestinian farmers, title deeds in hand, took their case to the Israeli Supreme Court, which ordered the government to move the settlers and return the land to the Palestinian farmers.

Second, the Israeli Government says it needs West Bank lands for "security requirements." In the case of Elon Morch, however, the Supreme Court ruled that the outpost did not satisfy any of Israel's security needs.

IN RIFIDA

One day I visit the Arab village called Rifida. There I meet the village leader, or *mukhtar*, Khahil Ahmad El-Mu'ti. A tall, slender, bearded man in long black robe with white silk headgear, he tells me in English that "The Israelis gave us no written notification that they would take our land. They came with their guns and they took it. We went to Bethlehem and hired a lawyer and complained. We get no help. Yet all of the

land is registered in the names of our people. And we have paid taxes for this land."

He introduces me to his wife, a large, genial woman who uses her maiden name of Sarah Ali Said. Where, I ask, was she born? "There, where they are! We have always lived there. The land was owned by my grandfather's grandfather. We have for generations planted wheat and barley on that land. Each Arab family in this community had a parcel there to plant its crops. How are we going to live?"

"Those who come and take our land— who are they? They come from Europe and America with their blue eyes and say that the land belongs to them. Who can believe them? Neither they nor their blue-eyed grandfathers ever lived on this land."

Dr. Paul Quiring, an American who for more than three years studied West Bank land titles under sponsorship of a United States Protestant group, the Mennonites, verified that the Rifida villagers had indeed paid taxes "on the land which was confiscated for the settlement." "The confiscation process is administered as if the Arab land owners have no right to the land which they have bought or inherited from their fathers, have paid taxes on for years, and which has provided them with their livelihood," Dr. Quiring said.

Still, Israel presses on with its West Bank settlement policy, creating a major point of friction in Mideast negotiations and contributing to the growing strain in U.S.-Israel relations. What Israel's policy will be in the future and what effect it will have in the area *and* in the U.S. is uncertain. But there is little to suggest that West Bank settlements will lead to a more secure and peaceful Israel; indeed, indications are just the reverse.

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