



The Year Without a Summer

by Lesley Dawson

We couldn't believe what we heard on the news. The USA and UK had declared war on Sadaam Hussein in Iraq. All because Tony Blair read a PhD student's unpublished thesis that seemed to indicate that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and planned to invade Kuwait. We didn't know what to think, but little did we know how it was going to affect us in Bethlehem.

The university called a meeting of all foreign teachers and the Vice Chancellor told us that whether we left or stayed the university would support us. The British Consulate had more or less said the same thing, we could leave or stay. However, if we stayed, we needed to register with the Israeli authorities for gas masks.

We decided to stay and joined the queues at the hardware shops for brown tape to put on the windows to stop flying glass and buying as much food as was left on the supermarket shelves by the time we got there.

Most of our friends left and Jack was leaned on by the American Consulate to leave. Being a Canadian gave me a bit more freedom. We discussed things with Brother Anton "All the Brothers are staying" he said" including the Americans", he chuckled. Being British with family in the military he adopted a savoir- faire approach to the situation. As he spoke, I could see a touch of Ian Fleming about his bearing.

"You could come and stay with us at the Brothers House or you could stay in your ground floor flat. Whatever you decide, we will make sure you are ok". Jack and I made the decision to stay in our flat. After all the two old ladies upstairs had lived here all their lives and they were not budging, so why should we.

No-one was quite prepared for the first attack. The problem was that the PLO had given their support to Iraq and the Israelis were convinced that they would help Sadaam attack Israel. To make things worse the “allies” had refused to give Israel the co-ordinates to bring down the missiles.

We didn't hear directly of course. If we had been in Jerusalem we would have heard the siren sounding from the Russian Compound which was the signal for people to go to their sealed rooms and put on their gas masks until the all-clear sounded. West Bankers were not issued with gas masks and had to listen for a message from Tantur Centre located just within Jerusalem and on the outskirts of Bethlehem, or from a passing army truck. They had loud speakers relaying the siren to us. That first time we were out shopping on Hebron Road along with most of the population when we heard this sound like a strangled cat caught on barbed wire.

After about five minutes of people looking at each other and shrugging one man shouted “Go home, this is an attack”. From whom we didn't know but gradually and then increasingly frenetically, people began to push their way back to their cars or rush inside their houses.

It seemed hours that we were confined to our version of a sealed room. Behind where the fridge was located was a space just big enough for two relatively small westerners to sit. That time we came out creaking but cheerful. As the attacks got more often it ceased to be fun and became worrying and eventually annoying. I did wonder how the families in the refugee camps coped with all their kids inside one room. I did not envy those mothers trying to keep them out of danger.

I also wondered about the Israeli patrols that still had to move around the West Bank to try to keep order. They had instructions to push everyone inside during an attack and then put on their own gas masks and lie flat on the ground. This became a joke when Palestinian young men climbed onto the roofs of their houses to try to see the Scuds coming overhead, on target for Israel. As they looked down at the ground they wolf whistled at the soldiers and called down insults in Hebrew.

Fortunately there were no Israeli settlements in Bethlehem so we were spared the trauma of settlers driving around refugee camps shooting their rifles into the air and harassing their Palestinian neighbours in loud Hebrew, warning them what would happen now that the world's media attention was concentrated on Iraq.

We did not keep an account of the days and weeks that all this went on. Nobody could go to work, to school or leave their houses except for short periods to get bread. It had to be the women who went out to buy food. Any men could be arrested by patrolling Israeli soldiers. Their tempers were as frayed as everyone else. By the time things were back to some kind of normality, the summer was over and children were back to school looking almost as tired as their parents.