



Guilty, Or Not Guilty?

by Lesley Dawson

We were over the moon. Save the Children had funded all of us to go to the World Physiotherapy Conference in London. All of us included three Brits, a Dutch woman and two Palestinians from Gaza.

What we could not have predicted was that we had all been added to the Israeli delegation by the conference administration. As you may imagine, my Palestinian male staff were livid when they found out.

“How could this happen, Lesley?” they shouted. I tried to calm them down and said that I guessed it was because, at the time, our office was in East Jerusalem at the Notre Dame Centre and as far as the organisers understand, that was part of Israel. Our Israeli colleagues were not impressed either to be continually congratulated on their two colleagues from Gaza.

Indignant that their cultural heritage was denied, Mohammed and Ahmed went back to the registration desk and asked for their country to be changed to Palestine on their conference labels.

The first I heard of this was when I was accosted by a retired, by influential, British woman in full flight who exploded with, “Can’t you control your staff, Lesley?” trailed by equally incensed Israelis, as, at the time, Palestine was a dirty word.

It took a while to unravel the mess that had ensued as a result of the boys now sporting labels which proudly proclaimed them Palestinian.

I was obviously meant to feel guilty about this, so outwardly looked solemn, while inwardly I giggled at the commotion caused by a forbidden name. I also had to explain gently to my esteemed colleague that one did not control one's staff these days.

The President of the conference called us together and suggested that the boys only have their names on their labels so that people would ask where they came from. They thought this was a very clever idea and were thrilled to explain about Palestine, to anyone who asked, embroidering the facts to imply that it was their Israeli "cousins" who had forbidden them to be labelled Palestinians. Of course, this gained them supporters, especially from Asian and African countries who felt it all smacked of imperialism.

I was advised to keep the UK as my country on my label and was wearing it when I met Queen Elizabeth the Second. My good friend, the President, winked as he introduced me as a British physiotherapist working in Bethlehem. Her Majesty said, "Ah, Palestine". 'Wow,' I thought she is a brave woman coming out with that name in public.

"That's right," I responded, grinning like an idiot, wondering who had briefed her about possible attendees in such a politically incorrect way.

"It must be difficult living there," she smiled. I knew we were only supposed to answer questions from royalty and respond to what they said so I dredged up a true, but inane, statement "It is not easy, but we manage."

As I reflected on the encounter, and regaled my family with the details I thought, honesty, for me, is usually the worst policy imaginable.