



Letter from Atarot

Penny Johnson

“Ana,” said the young good-natured man, pointing to the embroidered logo on his chest, which read “Oppenheimer.” After a circuitous search through the maze of the Atarot industrial zone looking for Oppenheimer chocolates – an Israeli company which had indicated it was moving elsewhere, hopefully out of occupied territory – we found contrary proof when we asked a Palestinian employee if this was Oppenheimer Chocolates. He said, rather tellingly, “It’s me!” We were visiting Atarot as informal spies, hoping to send some photographs to “Who Profits?,” an organization which monitors Israeli settlement products and Israeli economic activity in the occupied territories. We uttered an Inspector Clouseau-like “Aha!” when we found Oppenheimer, whose executives had told “Who Profits?” that the company was leaving Atarot. We duly photograph – rather shakily—the back

Map of Atarot Industrial Park. *Source:* author collection.



Sign for The Arab Orphans School at Atarot. *Source: author collection.*

lot of Oppenheimer Chocolates, still installed on occupied land, still in violation of international law. A Palestinian woman, her hair in a white net, smiles at us from a doorway.

The Atarot industrial zone – established by the Israeli Lands Administration on occupied territory after 1967 well beyond the ever-fading “Green Line” – is a border zone replete with contradictions. Moving around it, one could assume it is a rare zone of Jewish-Arab cooperation. The East Jerusalem companies, Sbitany and Herbawi co-exist side by side with Israeli Jewish-owned Super-Drinks and Abadi, the salted bageli maker. A few small Palestinian workshops are open in the interstices of the very large Israeli construction company making cement blocks or *beton*. Nabali and Seferi trucks ply their heavy way, deftly driven by Palestinian drivers playing Arabic music. When we ask (frequently) for directions, workers quickly switch to Arabic when they hear our halting inquiries. The Arab Orphans School, perhaps the only attractive structure in Atarot, has its gates open for Palestinian students. And the Bir Nabala – Jerusalem bus wends its way ever quarter of an hour or so through the streets, delivering workers to their jobs in Atarot, where an estimated two-thirds of employees are Palestinians.

Only the presence of two municipal and border police installations, a couple of watchtowers, and the Atarot checkpoint hint at a more conflicted reality whether within or beyond Atarot’s gates. Indeed, in 2001 and 2002, after several armed attacks by Palestinians on Israeli employers and employees, the future of the Atarot zone was in doubt, as businesses closed and Israeli employees refused to come. Atarot was then described as a “ghost town.”¹ The fluctuating fate of Atarot reminds us that it is

truly a border zone. Today the presence of many Palestinian workers is regulated by the permit system (with the exception of employees from East Jerusalem). Nearby, at the Qalandia checkpoint/terminal the grim reality of that system is self-evident as lines of workers show their permits and wait for a sulky soldier to wave them through. Amazingly, the head of the Jerusalem Development Authority, Ezra Levy, seems to view the permit system as a contribution to peace. Levy told *The Economist* that the granting of permits for West Bank Palestinians to work in Atarot should, “reduce the tension between the two populations.”²

While each Palestinian ID holder in Atarot probably has his or own tension-producing story on “permits,” an institutional example might suffice. Both the majority of teachers and students at the Arab Orphans School, now in the heart of the Atarot zone, hold Palestinian IDs and thus need permits, granted usually on a three-month basis. The School reports both missing teachers and missing students, undermining its educational mission.³ Even outside the gates, at the Atarot checkpoint (erected in 2005), students from Bir Nabala cannot pass to get to school in Ramallah without a permit. The land on which the checkpoint and surrounding military installations stand had previously been purchased by a Ramallah-based housing cooperative for teachers; their appeals to halt construction of the checkpoint were rejected. Meanwhile, as reported in *JQ* 35, housing schemes for about 11,000 Israeli Jewish housing units near Atarot were tendered but apparently are now frozen as the fate of the Atarot airport and perhaps the industrial zone are discussed in the on-going (some might say interminable) Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Israeli negotiators holding out the promise of the airport and industrial zone, presumably in return for Palestinian concessions on Jerusalem, as something of Ezra Levy’s cheery assessment of “permits” as reducing tension. Can we at least say that justice is missing from the equation?

In the shadow of a large factory in Atarot, a Palestinian man stands with his wife beside a tin shack where he once operated a small stone workshop. He has a “permit” but his workshop is not operating. Asked why he was idle, he cites “the *boursa*” [stock market] and global economic conditions, reminding us that economic forces, as well as Israeli power, may dictate what happens in Atarot. So perhaps we should continue to click away, taking pictures of Israeli businesses in illegal operation, calling for their products to be boycotted, and placing hope in international solidarity, rather than a trading of favors in stalled negotiations.

Penny Johnson is an Associate Editor of the Jerusalem Quarterly and editor of this issue of JQ. She thanks Judy Blanc for her companionship and contribution on this journey through Atarot.

Endnotes

- 1 “An Intifada Casualty Named Atarot,” Larry Derfner, *Jewish Journal*, 22 March 2001.
- 2 “Last Conquest of Jerusalem,” *The Economist*, 12 April 2006.
- 3 “The Atarot Arab Orphan School Under Threat,” al-Haq, 14 December 2006.



Sketch of Bus 18 by Vladimir Tamari, circa 1963. *Source: Vera Tamari Collection.*