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ISRAEL, GAZA: Holocaust survivor explains why she became Palestinian rights activist

January 6, 2010 | 3:42 pm

Hedy Epstein is what some might see as a contradiction in terms: a survivor of the Holocaust and also a staunch advocate for the Palestinian people. Born in 1924 in Freiburg, Germany, Epstein was 14 when she escaped from Nazi persecution via the [Kinderstransport](#) to England. Since her 1948 arrival in the U.S., Epstein has been an advocate for peace and human rights.

In 2001 she founded the St. Louis chapter of the [Women in Black](#) anti-war group that originated in Israel, and has actively advocated for Palestinian rights since visiting the West Bank in 2003. As the last decade came to a close, Epstein continued her advocacy by traveling with the women's peace advocacy group [CodePink](#) to the [Gaza Freedom March](#). The Dec. 31 march was a planned nonviolent demonstration to protest Israel's blockade of Gaza, with 1,000 advocates from abroad joining Palestinians in a march to the Gaza-Israel border checkpoint.

Although Egyptian authorities refused to let the full contingent of protesters into Gaza, the 100 activists that were permitted to enter [carried on the anti-blockade message](#). Prior to the planned Gaza march, Epstein spoke with Babylon and Beyond about her past experiences in Israel, dealing with the controversy of being a Holocaust survivor who criticizes Israel, and the Gaza Freedom March.

How did you get interested in the Israel/Palestine issue?

I was born in Germany, I'm Jewish -- after Hitler came to power, my parents realized very quickly that Germany was not a good place to raise a family. They were willing to go anywhere in the world, but one place they were not willing to go to was Palestine -- they were anti-Zionists. As a child I didn't quite understand this, but if my parents were anti-Zionist, I was anti-Zionist. I came to the U.S. in 1948, around the same time Israel became a state, about which I had mixed feelings. On the one hand it was a place for Holocaust survivors to go to, those who could not or did not want to return to their homes, but on the other, I considered my parents' ardent anti-Zionism. While I was new in the U.S., Israel and Palestine remained on the back burner of my interests. In 1982, I heard about the massacres in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon -- I wanted to know who



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was responsible for this, what had happened between 1948 and 1982. As I learned more, I became increasingly disturbed by the policies of Israel and its military. Fast forward to 2003 -- I was in the West Bank for the first time, and have been there five times since then.

This will be my third try to go to Gaza. The first try was with the Free Gaza Movement when they tried to take boats through Israel's naval blockade, but right before, in Cypress, I became ill -- it was 120 degrees, with matching humidity. The second try, the Free Gaza Movement members were worried what about might happen to me, so in deference I didn't go with them. I was to go again in June 2009, but the day before I was to go, I was assaulted. I don't know whether I was targeted or if it was a random act of violence -- I was coming back from the airport, but my suitcase and pocketbook, neither were touched -- it was not theft.

Why did you decide to go with CodePink and participate in the group's Gaza Freedom March?

I've known about CodePink for quite some time and when I found out they were planning a march to Gaza, I decided I would go. I tried twice and didn't succeed, and so maybe the third time is the charm. Egyptian organizers recently told the group they could not go through the Rafah border ([more information](#)). Other times groups were told they could not go, but then were permitted to go with restrictions. So we will go forward, and we'll take it one day, one minute at a time. And if we don't get in, that too will make a huge statement.

How have people reacted to your decision to be an advocate for Palestinians?

It depends whom you're talking to or whom you're talking about. The mainstream, organized Jewish community, both locally and in other places, have called me anti-Semitic, a self-hating Jew. I'm not anti-Israel, but you're not allowed to criticize Israel or else you're anti-Semitic, and if you're Jewish you're a self-hating Jew. I don't hate myself. You're allowed to criticize every other country, including the U.S., but not Israel, why is that?

How do you think Israel will respond to nonviolence/direct action?

I don't know. I hope they will be nonviolent. When I was in the West Bank, before I went, I was told that the Palestinians are going to hurt me, they are going to do awful things to me. But they were the ones that protected me. In one demonstration, in 2006, near Ramallah, I lost some of my hearing because an Israeli sound bomb went off very close to me. The Palestinians near me were very concerned. I was strip-searched, internally searched at Israel's David Ben Gurion airport, I was told that "I was a terrorist, I'm a security risk." An 80-year-old woman is a terrorist? What, do I have a bomb in my vagina?

Do you think there can be peace in Israel in the near future?

In the near future, no. I'm an inveterate optimist, so someday there will be peace, but a lot of things have to change before that happens. If the occupation were to stop overnight, it would make all the difference in the world. Israel is the fourth-largest military entity in the world. They have the newest equipment, and it's used on the Palestinians. Also, if the U.S. stopped funding Israel, that would be another way of bringing about peace. We have humongous problems in this country, people are unemployed, losing their homes, we could use that money instead of overseas in a destructive way. Let's use it constructively. I think we should let the people decide what they want instead of telling them what they should do.

-- Daniel Siegal

Photo: Holocaust survivor Hedy Epstein, center, and Gaza Freedom Marchers activists shout slogans during a Dec. 29 protest in Cairo to mark the one-year anniversary of the Israeli invasion of Gaza. Credit: Amr Nabil / Associated Press

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