

2-Rachel Corrie Died In Palestine Rubble, But Her Issue Lives"

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by Philip Weiss

On the morning of March 10, Cindy Corrie stopped inside Union Station and called her daughter overseas to go over the facts one more time, before setting forth for the Capitol, a copy of The Christian Science Monitor under her arm, to lobby Congressmen on two issues: the human rights of Palestinians, and American embassy protection for internationals like her daughter, who was taking part in protests in the occupied territories.

That was the last time mother and daughter spoke. Six days later, Rachel Corrie, 23, died when she was crushed by an armored bulldozer outside the home of a Palestinian pharmacist in the Gaza Strip.

Washington Congressman Brian Baird was soon back in touch with Cindy Corrie, to help her get her daughter's body back to Olympia, Wash. And since then, Mr. Baird has introduced legislation calling for an investigation of the circumstances of Rachel Corrie's death, which the Israelis have ruled an unfortunate accident.

It is widely said that Mr. Baird's bill is doomed. The Jewish Forward says the legislation will never reach the floor, adding (inaccurately) that only Arab-American groups are for it. Only 19 Congressmen have signed on to the bill, chiefly Democrats such as Georgia's John Lewis, who was badly injured himself in nonviolent protest during the civil-rights movement. The two Washington Senators have made mild statements about Ms. Corrie, but their offices didn't return my calls. The refrain everywhere these days is, "Israel is the only democracy in the region."

All the same, Ms. Corrie's death would seem to mark a fresh phase in the effort to bring criticism of the long Israeli occupation into the American mainstream.

Many grassroots Jewish groups have endorsed Congressman Baird's

legislation. They tend to be small, but have gained force in major urban centers, and have names like Jews Against the Occupation (New York), Not in My Name (Chicago) or A Jewish Voice for Peace (in the Bay Area). And they all see the 36-year occupation as a disaster for Israeli society.

"Rachel Corrie represented the finest tradition of nonviolent peacemaking," said Rachael Kamel of the Jewish Mobilization for a Just Peace, in Philadelphia. "An investigation is needed not only to clarify the circumstances of her death, but also to help Congress and the American public understand more fully the violence carried out every day in the occupied territories. "Rachel Corrie is a hero," said Washington-based Charles Lenchner, president of Jews for Peace in Palestine and Israel. "These international volunteers represent the best of what American values are all about—Martin Luther King—style action."

Sadly, the issue has gained greater momentum from further bloodshed. Since Ms. Corrie's death, two other members of the group she was a part of, the International Solidarity Movement, have been grievously injured in shootings by the Israeli Defense Force.

Wayne Firestone, director of the Center for Israel Affairs at the Hillel Foundation, says that the international movement is a small one—and a dubious one.

"It's deeply disturbing to see young people being sent into a war zone against U.S. policy," he said. "I don't want it to be construed as 'She deserved it.' But to recklessly send students—many of whom are well-intentioned—to send them into harm's way in defiance of United States State Department travel restrictions is doing a great disservice, not just to the goal of peace in the area, but to the interests of these young people."

Hillel and other mainstream Jewish organizations won the last battle on the home front in which they were engaged: the Israeli divestment movement.

Last year, critics of the occupation circulated petitions on major campuses seeking divestment from companies doing business in Israel. They met strong resistance: Hillel groups organized protests, with the slogan "Wherever We Stand, We Stand With Israel." Many university administrators opposed the policies, and some of them, said Jeffrey Ross, campus-affairs director for the Anti-Defamation League, were "not card-carrying members of the pro-Israel community."

Most prominently, Harvard president Lawrence Summers said that the movement was "anti-Semitic in effect if not intent."

Mr. Summers' charge caused enormous agitation and pain in the Boston area. Some academics protested that no criticism of Israel could be allowed. "They were totally unprepared for the rage—often from Jewish colleagues, Jewish friends," said one person who supported divestment.

in place of thoughtful, sensitive professors, this next chapter features young activists sleeping in Palestinians' houses, walking down lanes in the West Bank, and also drawing scorn back here.

"I didn't anticipate that anyone would be able to come up with a rationalization for what happened to Rachel, but she's been treated as rape victims have been treated," Hilda Silverman, a member in Boston of Jewish Women for Justice in Israel/Palestine. And Susan Jacoby of Women in Black, a loose-knit group of women who oppose the occupation, wrote to me: "I hope that in your own work you will not be participating in the intensifying and vitriolic campaign to smear that young woman's name and deny her contribution to the NON-violent movement and the cause of peace with justice."

A widely circulated article in the Jewish press on Ms. Corrie's death said that she died "sheltering Palestinian murderers." A similar article said that Rachel Corrie was protecting tunnels used by terrorists to bring weapons in from Egypt. Some have highlighted a picture of Ms. Corrie at a protest, burning a paper image of an American flag.

"Alice," 27, a Jewish Englishwoman who is a member of I.S.M. and comforted Rachel Corrie as she died, says that the land on which Ms. Corrie was crushed is outside the house of an English-speaking Palestinian pharmacist and his wife and three children, in a zone that Israelis have sought to clear in all kinds of ways, from bulldozing to random shootings into living rooms. Yes, there are tunnels into Egypt from homes in Rafah, Alice says, but the armed Palestinians who built them give I.S.M. a wide berth, and vice versa.

I.S.M. says that the other two members who were injured were also engaged in nonviolent protest. Brian Avery, 24, an American, was walking down a road at dusk in the embattled West Bank city of Jenin when he was shot in the face. He is said to be recovering, but will require several more surgeries. Tom Hurdall, 21, an Englishman, was hustling children away from an Israeli tank on a square in Rafah, the city in which Rachel Corrie died, when he was shot in the head. He is now on life support, and his father, a lawyer, has also called for an international investigation.

For over a year, I.S.M. had operated in the belief that as internationals, they were immune to certain types of attack. That feeling is over, and I.S.M. is reconsidering its tactics.

Still, leaders say the movement doesn't lack for recruits. "Before the last month, we were getting maybe seven applications every three days," said Tom Wallace. "I think the last time I checked, we were getting 10 a day."

Mr. Wallace, 43, cut his teeth in AIDS activism in Boston. Alice comes out of the antiglobalist movement. It would seem that hundreds of young people have flowed through I.S.M., chiefly from the United States, Canada, the

U.K., Sweden and Italy.

They have sought to stop certain actions by the Israeli army—for a time, I.S.M. says, Corrie and other activists camped outside a well that the I.D.F. was trying to destroy—but also to bring American attention to the protested practices.

Rachel Corrie's death has focused attention on the Israeli policy of house demolition, under which the army will bulldoze houses belonging to families said to have a connection to suicide bombers. "What Saddam Hussein would do is torture and shoot the family; what Israel does is destroy the house as a deterrent, to get them to think twice," said Jeffrey Ross of A.D.L.

The Israeli human-rights group B'Tselem says that there have been 271 house demolitions in the last year and a half. It says the process is "extrajudicial"—i.e., without a requirement of proof by any judicial body—and represents a "gross violation" of proscriptions against collective punishment.

In America, Rachel Corrie's death raises a different question: Is there a place in our politics for those who see the occupation as objectionable and feel that the U.S. must put more pressure on the Israeli government to change?

That argument has come down, in the eyes of some, to the person and motivation of Rachel Corrie.

Very well: Rachel Corrie was passionate, highly focused and grew up in an internationalist-oriented family. Foreign-exchange students (from Brazil, Japan and Russia) stayed in the Corrie house, and in high school, Rachel visited Russia and came back saying, "My heart is in Olympia, but my soul is in Russia." Her older brother and sister pursued more conventional paths. In college, Rachel worked part-time for three years serving the mentally ill.

She had such enormous empathy for the suffering of others that she could be a pain in the ass. She pushed her handsome, reserved boyfriend to cry—and when he finally did, ate the tear and recorded the event with triumph in her journal before leaving him for the zillionth time, he said, smiling, at her memorial service at Evergreen State College in March.

That service began with a prayer from Rachel's Jewish uncle. And many of her teachers from elementary school spoke with awe about the girl's sense of purpose. A film was played in which 10-year-old Rachel made a fierce statement about children's deaths from hunger: "People in Third World countries think and laugh and smile, just like us. We have got to understand that we are them; they are us."

That universalist feeling is what took her to Rafah and death, as it would have taken her to Philadelphia, Miss., 40 years ago. She was in an

American tradition."

"We know that Rachel's death has been politicized," her mother said. "I would like people to know that we're receiving a tremendous amount of support from Jewish people around the world. And I also want people to know how much empathy we have for what the Israeli people have suffered. I feel that I know something of their pain."

As she held off the bulldozers made by the American company Caterpillar, Rachel joked about dressing in glam-rock costumes instead of the orange vest that didn't save her, about playing Pat Benatar's "Love Is a Battlefield" on a boombox.

She was hard-working and hard-laughing, her blond hair was greasy, her room was a mess.

"Rachel was a hometown girl," said Evergreen college president Thomas (Les) Purce, who'd known her for many years. Maybe she has managed to bring an issue back with her.

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