

First Person—Singular

By Judy Haiven

What has happened to us? What happened to our generation of Jewish-Canadian boomers, aged 50 and up?

We were raised with the Holocaust as our back-story. It turns out it was everyone's back-story.

Not all of us had parents with tattooed numbers on their forearms, but enough did to "scare us silent." That is what happened to Jews our age—we were scared silent.

There are a few good things about being scared silent. When we were teenagers, it used to be called "scared straight." Teachers and parents used to call on the beat cop to warn us teens away from running with gangs, or growing dope, or driving under the influence.

We did not bother to talk back or question, unless we were left radicals. Some who couldn't stand the rules in the 60s and 70s went back to the land to live without rules. Others fought capitalism, fought rules and were sometimes jailed.

Fast-forward to today. We are the grownups now. Most of us are parents, but have none. Yet the fix is in: we cannot stand the idea of their disapproval of us, even if it's from the grave. We are still haunted by the spectre of disloyalty to them and their generation, a generation stunted by war and anti-Semitism. Both these problems scare us silent.

How else can we explain the fact that so many Jews of our generation refuse to speak about or even acknowledge the atrocities committed by the IDF? How else can we explain the silence among Jews in January 2011, when the IDF bulldozed 16 houses, an animal pen, a store plus a school classroom in Dkaika, a village of 300 goatherders in the West Bank? The excuse was that the villagers lacked a building permit. This village has no water, and no electricity. Up to this point, the only threat villagers faced was violence from the nearby settlers—settlers who, more often than not in the area south of Hebron, are Jewish fundamentalists from the U.S., Britain and Canada.

Another bout of deafening silence from Jews came when Israeli commandoes killed nine Turkish aid workers and injured 40 aboard the Mavi Marmara. The massacre occurred in international waters. There was no question that the cargo con-

sisted of humanitarian supplies and medicine for Gazans. But we Canadian Jews—doctors, lawyers, university professors, businesspeople, artists and writers—were silent.

Eight years ago we were scared silent when an IDF bulldozer operator—who cannot be named because he was just following orders—rumbled his bulldozer into the mound on which 23-year old Rachel Corrie stood in her orange safety vest. She was an American peace activist protesting the demolition of a pharmacist's home in Gaza. Photos showed her frantically waving her presence to the driver, before she was deliberately run over by the bulldozer. What threat was she? Still, most Canadian Jews stayed quiet, or worse, condemned her.

We were scared silent when Israel, in its totally illegal Operation Cast Lead 2008-9, used white phosphorous shells against civilians in Gaza. We Jews, early, middle or late baby boomers all—could not help but notice these were the same chemical weapons we used to protest mightily when the U.S. used them against civilians in Viet Nam, more than 35 years ago.

We were scared silent when Justice Richard Goldstone's UN report noted that "serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law were committed by Israel during the Gaza conflict." Worse: Canada's B'nai Brith railed that "The Goldstone Report is an outrage to any objective watcher of recent events in the Middle East." B'nai Brith's Executive Vice-President Frank Dimant linked sympathy with Palestinians with sympathy for the Nazis, saying, "If the rules of war that the UN is trying to create were around during World War II, the Allies would have been lambasted for defeating the Nazis."

But our collective silence really began more than 40 years ago. It built quickly in the wake of Israel's 1967 war and was cemented into place by the 1973 war. Those were the best of times—more than thirty years after Hitler, we Jews had a state of our own. We Jews were untouchable. And Israel had a right to defend, to conquer and to control—or so we believed.

Those of us who were skeptical of the occupation were banished to the margins of the Canadian Jewish community. That did not hurt us much, as we were in our 20s and 30s and avoided the synagogues. Many of us lived with partners who were not Jewish. We had left behind the Jewish world of our childhoods. Now we worked for NGOs, lived abroad, taught in universities, wrote for the media and were alive and kicking in the wider world. Even the handful of

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us who dived into the world to change it, did not tinker with Israel.

But somehow, we had been scared silent; we did not criticize Israel. The politically active among us criticized Russia, then China. We distanced ourselves from the old Communist Party, then watched the New Left fizzle and burn. We continued to support the bits and pieces that remained of the left, and struggles for democracy in faraway places like China, the Balkans and Latin America. But open support for ending the occupation of Palestine was never part of our kaleidoscope of causes.

In the 1980s, Holocaust literature and films began to spring up. We cried at the rawness of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* and the tragedy in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. Some made the pilgrimage to Yad Vashem, but we didn't take much notice when it expanded and became a mandatory pilgrimage for non-Jews who visited the Holy Land. A visit to Yad Vashem became part of the punishment for Canadian public figures who were naughty or merely "needed to" forge connections with Israel. In the last decade, the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) sent more than 20 Inuit leaders on tours to Israel dubbed "From the Land of the North Star to the Land of the Star of David." In 2005, David Ahenakew, former chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), made an anti-Semitic comment to a journalist, although his conviction for hate speech was overturned on appeal. Is that why First Nations leaders have to do penance at Yad Vashem? In 2006 the CJC sent Phil Fontaine, former Grand Chief of the AFN, to visit Yad Vashem. In 2007, Canada's Jewish National Fund (JNF) sent Ovide Mercredi, former National Chief of the AFN and now Chief of Misipawistik First Nation, to Israel, "to help revitalize his community."

We never questioned the Israel-sponsored trips for university presidents such as Peter MacKinnon of the University of Saskatchewan, Allan Rock of the University of Ottawa, and even William Barker from the tiny yet prestigious University of King's College in Halifax. Or the two free trips for Canadian hockey greats, Daryl Sittler and Paul Henderson, courtesy of the Canada-Israel Committee (CIC).

In the last couple of years the Canada-Israel Committee also paid for at least 24 federal politicians, and their spouses, to go to Israel. This concerned Canada's Ethics Commissioner, but few Canadian Jews thought anything was amiss. This is on top of provincial leaders, including Gary Doer and this fall, Darrell Dexter, also

going on junkets.

While all these official tourists have visited Yad Vashem and West Jerusalem, few have set foot over the old Green Line, a stone's throw from the Old City's gates. The exceptions were three Canadian opposition MPs, including Libby Davies from the NDP, who traveled to Israel, the West Bank and Gaza at their own expense in 2009. The three investigated the effect of Israel's war on Gaza eight months earlier. A year after their trip, Prime Minister Stephen Harper demanded that Davies

resign as her party's deputy leader after she said—accurately—that Israel had been occupying Palestinians' land since 1948. Davies was forced to apologize. In accepting her apology, NDP leader Jack Layton said that she had made "a serious mistake" about the date, and that his party would never "deny that Israel not only has a right to exist but a right to exist in secure borders in a safe context." Of course Layton's response was to pour water on the bush fire— and few of

us spoke up.

In our silence, we Jews have allowed Israel to be seen as a neutral country— not as the only settler-colonial state left in the world, not as a place rife with human rights abuses aimed at 20% of its citizens who are Arabs, not as a country that violently enforces an illegal occupation over millions of Palestinians. We who read newspapers, the Internet, and have relatives in Israel won't say a word.

Here is a story that resonates closer to home. I have three Jewish women friends. One friend, a doctor, goes on trips to hear and help women rape victims of the Balkan war. She assiduously avoids going to Palestine and hearing the Palestinians. A second friend has traveled to China and recently to Israel, but never to the West Bank—"In 10 days, what could I see?" she asked. So she stuck to the Old City and the beaches of Tel Aviv. A third friend has a daughter who never attended Hebrew or religious school, but she married an Israeli Jew. So steeped has she become in the lore of Israel— especially in her new family's furious self-justifications—that she rejects her mother's mild admonitions about Israel's policies and the occupation.

In 2011, our parents can no longer argue with us or disapprove of us. Our group of 50-plus-year-olds are marching away from human rights, social justice, and what is right. We Canadian Jews have been scared silent. And we owe it to the Palestinians—and to ourselves—to speak out. The clock's ticking. ♦

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