

Conscientious Objectors in Israel and the United States

by Polly Mann, W A M M

Maya Wind and Netta Mishly are now, more than likely, back in their homes in Jerusalem after spending three weeks in the United States touring college campuses from UC Berkeley to Brown University, discussing Americans' role in maintaining Israel's occupation of Palestine. They, along with other members of Shministim—Israeli high school seniors who have refused Israel's mandatory draft—sent a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stating that they “will toil against the occupation and oppressive policies of the Israeli government in the occupied territories and . . . refuse to take part in actions related to such policies, which are carried out in our name by the Israeli Defence Force.” Three other Shministim toured Africa proclaiming the same message.

Wind said the turning point in her attitude towards Palestinians occurred during a meeting of the organization Face to Face, a dialogue group for Palestinian and Israeli children as she listened to a teen-age Palestinian: “It changed my perspective. It opened my eyes to the fact that Israelis can do bad things. That seems elementary . . . I had been taught our soldiers were the good guys, that everything Israel did was for self-defense.” Wind now works full time for the organization Rabbis for Human Rights.

Because of his views, one of the Shministim, Efi Brenner, was expelled from his home by his father. After submitting a letter of refusal to accept recruitment, Brenner spent several days in Military Prison No. 6, before the Army granted him a temporary exemption due to his being under-weight.

Or Ben-David, imprisoned for refusing service, is one of a set of triplets each of whom has taken a different course regarding military conscription. Or's brother Sewgev, avoided service by being declared “unfit” by the military authorities. Her brother Etgar accepted service but promised his sister that if he were ordered to break into Palestinian homes he would do it but would not tease or provoke her by boasting about it.

Or did not choose to go to prison but failed in her attempt to get an exemption. She described the application process as “a very traumatic experience—these three male officers, behind the table, very arrogant and patronizing, calling me a coward and not believing in the existence of my conscience. After that I knew that there was no choice for me—I had to confront them head-on, as determined and as public as I could make it—however long it would take.”

Supporting the Shministim is New Profile, a ten- year-old group that has been so effective in spreading its pacifist message that its offices were raided by police, computers confiscated and members arrested for “inciting desertion at war.”

Solidarity between anti-war groups in Israel and the U.S. focuses on the link between the occupation of Palestine by the Israeli military and the occupation of Iraq by the U.S. military and a refusal to serve based on the military’s human rights abuses. Former U.S. Marine Stephen Funk, a member of DAM, Courage to Resist, and President of the San Francisco chapter of Iraq Veterans Against the War, who refused to serve in the military, and was given a bad conduct discharge and six months imprisonment, said that the “first international support I got in 2003 was from Israeli resisters and anti-war activists. It’s natural for me to work with these groups because of the money and support our country gives to maintain Israel’s occupation.”

The WAMM newsletter, worldwideWAMM, will now feature PM, a regular column by WAMM co-founder Polly Mann. A frequent contributor to these pages, Polly serves on the WAMM Newsletter and Middle East Committees.