

Palestine: “I was not prepared for all the horrors that I saw”

An Interview with Hedy Epstein

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Saint Louis. Missouri.

Hedy Epstein, 82, was born in Freiburg, Germany, in 1924(1) and lived in Kippenheim, a village located approximately 30 km north of Freiburg. She was the only child of parents who died in the Nazi extermination camps. She is a tireless worker for human rights and for the dignity of all people.

Hedy decided to visit Palestine in 2003. She returned terribly shocked with what she had seen there, women and children defenceless, Palestinians locked up into ghettos, an entire people brutalized.

She had learned to love the people that she met, and was determined to tell the world of the injustices she had seen. Palestinians were being dispossessed of their land, removed from the homes that they had lived in for centuries. Nothing that anyone has done, no protests that have been made, has made Israel stop its treatment of the Palestinians. In fact, it has become worse every time Hedy has returned.

So, she is joining other human rights advocates who are sailing to Gaza on the boat, FREE GAZA (2) to demand justice for the Palestinians, and a correction of 60 years of oppression by the Israelis.

Silvia Cattori: Your entire life has been devoted to justice. But, since 2003, you have increased that commitment by advocating for justice for the Palestinians. I understand you are going to take some risks to make the world aware of the crimes perpetrated against them!?

Hedy Epstein: I was invited to join the Free Gaza boat by the organizers, and I feel honoured that I was invited to join (3).

Silvia Cattori: Entering the waters of Gaza with Palestinian, international, and Israeli peace activists is sure to be a wonderful project; but won't it be full of tension? Are you not anxious about participating in such an expedition?

Hedy Epstein: Of course, I have some concerns. But, does life insure that nothing will happen to me? You know, tomorrow morning when I get out of bed, I might feel so sleepy that I'll trip over my own feet and fall down and break my back. So what am I going to do, remain in bed for the rest of my life? No.

There are no guarantees in life. Perhaps no one should put herself in a situation that's dangerous. But my participation is a small contribution that I can make compared to the sufferings that the Palestinians endure every single day. And, if by doing this, we can tell the world what is happening there, then it's worth going. I'm 82 years old, and I have lived, most of the time, a good life. Let me make a contribution before it's too late.

Silvia Cattori: This boat going to Gaza coincides with the 60th anniversary of the departure from Marseille of the EXODUS. Don't you think it's somewhat controversial to be in a boat sailing to the same place as the EXODUS?

Hedy Epstein: No. What I'm doing is what I believe in, and what I stand for. In some quarters, especially in the mainstream Jewish community, it looks like I'm a traitor, a "self-hating Jew". Nonsense. I don't hate myself. Several years ago, the editor of a Jewish weekly newspaper said to me that I shouldn't have gone to Palestine. Instead I should have gone to Israel to volunteer in a hospital where people were being treated for injuries as a result of a Palestinian suicide bombing.

And I said I'd be happy to volunteer, but if I did help in an Israeli hospital, would he go to a Palestinian hospital and help people who have been injured as a result of what the Israelis have done? He was appalled. "In Palestine?" I said, « Yes, you can, I have been there, so you can go there also, and when you do that, then I will be happy to work in an Israeli hospital». That was several years ago, and I have never heard from him since then.

Silvia Cattori: Why did you choose to advocate in a place where the Israelis are so opposed to your involvement?

Hedy Epstein: Let me give you a little bit of my background, so that you will know how I've gotten to where I am today. I was born into a Jewish family in Germany. When Hitler came to power, I was eight years old. My parents very quickly realised that Germany was not a safe place for them to stay and to raise a family. They were willing to go anywhere, and they tried desperately to leave. But they were NEVER willing to go to Palestine, because they were ardent anti-Zionists.

I didn't understand at the time what Zionism was and what being an anti-Zionist was, but I did know that in the village where I lived, which is Kippenheim in South-West Germany, there was a "Zionist" youth group and my parents did not allow me to participate in it. I was the only Jewish child in the village who didn't become a part of that group. Since my parents were ardent anti-Zionists, even though I didn't understand what this really meant, I was an ardent anti-Zionist also.

Then, in 1939, thanks to my parent's great love for me, I was able to leave Germany on a Children's transport (Kindertransport) to England. When I left in May 1939, it was the last time that I saw my parents and other family members. They all died in the camps. I came to United States in May 1948, about the same time that Israel became a state. I had some mixed feelings about that event. On the one hand I was very happy there was a place for people to go who had survived the holocaust, who perhaps didn't want or weren't able to return to their places of origin, but on the other hand, remembering my parents' ardent anti-Zionism, I was worried that somewhere down the road, no good was going to come of this. What that might be, I couldn't even imagine. But I was new in the United States, and there were new things to learn. So Israel was on the backburner of my interest and remained there for years.

In 1982, I received my personal wake-up call: the terrible massacres in the two refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila in Lebanon. I needed to find out what the tragedy was all about, why it happened, and who was responsible. Then, when I found out, I needed to learn more about the history of what happened between 1948, when Israel became a state, and 1982 in Sabra and Chatila. And the more I learned and the more I understood, the more I became disturbed by what the Israeli government was doing, and doing in my name.

So, the more I learned, the more I began to speak out publicly against the policies and practices of the Israeli government vis-à-vis the Palestinian people. Then, in December 2003, I went to Palestine.

Silvia Cattori: You had never entered Israel before?

Hedy Epstein: I had gone in 1981 to attend the first, and probably the only international gathering of holocaust survivors. It wasn't a happy experience for me. I found that the survivors who attended seemed to be in competition with each other as to who suffered more. They would say "Where were you, in which camp?" and, no matter what the answer was, the person who asked the question would always say, "Where you were, it was nothing, it was much worse where I was". Why compete with each other about who suffered more? Every one of them suffered, and true, some of them suffered more than others, but let us not compete about this.

And we were taken on a sightseeing tour, and the people on the bus would ask:

"Who lives in this area?"

"These are Jewish people".

"Oh, it is beautiful, the gardens are beautiful. Who lives over here?"

"These are Palestinians".

"Oh, it stinks, it smells, it's terrible, it's dirty".

In fact, the windows of the bus were closed, and even if they were opened, we couldn't have smelled anything in the bus. This disturbed me, this kind of discrimination and talk against the Palestinians that they didn't even know. So that is why it was not a happy experience for me and left a very bad taste in my mouth, and I never went back.

In September 2003, I participated in Saint Louis, Missouri in a weekly vigil against the war in Iraq. We had been holding these vigils long before the war started, beginning right after 9/11, every Sunday. A friend of mine was standing next to me and asked me "Have you ever thought of going to Palestine?"

I was shocked and surprised by my response, which was: "Yes, I'm going". In fact, I hadn't made any plans to go at all, but maybe, in my head, subconsciously, I was thinking about it all along and had been preparing myself to go. By December of 2003, the friend who asked me, two other women and I, were in Palestine for the first time. I went back in 2004, 2005, 2006, and I hope to go to Gaza this year.

Silvia Cattori: Was it a difficult experience for you?

Hedy Epstein. I was really not prepared for all the horrors that I saw. For instance, I had heard about checkpoints. And I thought a checkpoint was something like a toll booth on a highway here in the United-States. It's not like that at all. And it's gotten worse every time I return. The way they are now, they remind me of when animals are rounded up and taken to slaughter, it's just so humiliating.

Let me share an experience that I had the very first time that I was in Palestine. We were at a checkpoint near Ramallah. I was asked some questions by an Israeli reservist; he was probably in his late forties or early fifties, he looked at my passport, and then he asked me if I was Jewish, and I said that I was. And then he asked me if I had ever gone to Ramallah. Before I could answer, in a very angry tone he said "Don't you know that every Jew who goes to Ramallah is going to be cut in half?" And he moved his hand four times across his waist, repeating "will be cut in half" four times.

But I had just come from Ramallah, where I had stayed with two different Palestinian families, and obviously had not been cut in half. In fact, the hospitality that I received from these two families, as well as by others in other places, is unlike any hospitality that I have ever received anywhere in the world. I always, at the very beginning, made it clear that I am Jewish, and it has never made any difference. No matter whom I encountered, families I have lived with, or people on the street, when I told them that I was Jewish, it never made any difference. They, as well as I, refused to be enemies. The real enemies were the Israelis. They were the ones who treated me miserably and painfully.

Silvia Cattori: So, it was a shock for you to discover that the Israeli soldiers humiliate and brutalize Palestinian people in such an inhuman way?

Hedy Epstein: Right. In some ways I feel sorry for the Israeli soldiers who are in Palestine, because of what it's doing to them. What kind of people are they going to be when they get out of the military? Are they going to abuse their children, their wives, because they are used to abusing Palestinians? It must do something awfully bad to them. The occupation and all that chaos has to stop, for the sake, not only of the Palestinian people, but also for the sake of the Israeli people.

Silvia Cattori: What about you? Were you brutalized by the police when you were in Israel?

Hedy Epstein: Yes I was. I was in Ben Gurion Airport in January, 2004. I was returning from the occupied territories in the company of another woman. When we arrived at the airport, the first security person we encountered separated the two of us. My friend was asked to move over to the right, and I was asked to move to the left. I was trying to make some sense of this and thought, well maybe it's because she's Christian and the Christians go to the right and the Jews go to the left? When I got to passport control, and I had given my passport and tickets, the woman there typed something in the computer and seemingly, like growing out of the floor, two men stood next to me, "We are security". They had their name badges turned around, so I asked them "What are your names?" and they remained silent.

I was taken to a place which I later found out was the police station in the airport. I was told to move into a little cubicle, which was part of a larger room, and I had take off my shoes, which were taken somewhere to be X-rayed. I was patted down, wanded, then asked to get undressed. I said "You have no right to ask me to do this, I want an attorney," and she said, "Sure, you can have an attorney but you are going to be detained at the airport detention

centre until you get one”.

How on earth could I get an attorney, since they had taken my telephone, so I was not able to be in touch with anyone on the outside? Also, I was worried about what was happening to my friend, were they doing the same thing to her? One of us had to get out of here and help the other one and maybe I am the one. So I agreed to get undressed. Not only did I have to get undressed in front of this young woman, who was probably 22 years old, but, after I got undressed, she asked me to bend over. I said “Why?” and she said, “Because we have to examine you internally”. I had never been so angry and upset as I was at that time. I asked “Why are you doing this?” She said: “Because you are a terrorist, you are a security risk.”

Meanwhile, they were going through every item in my luggage. Once I came out of that cubicle, and I was dressed again, they were still going through my luggage and finally they were done and then they said, “You can pack your stuff.” I was so angry that I said: “You unpacked it, you pack it.”

I was also observing what was going on with other people that were in that police station. There was a young woman with a little baby who was about seven or eight months old, and they were going through her luggage and at some point the baby started to cry and she wanted to appease the baby with food that she had brought along with her. They refused to let her feed that baby. I talked to her briefly, and she said “I’m an Israeli, I’m Jewish, I was born in Israel, but I live in England and probably this is happening to me and to my baby, because I’m being punished because I don’t live in Israel any longer”.

Silvia Cattori: Why did the Israeli police treat you in such a humiliating way? Did they want to punish you, because you take the side of the Palestinian victims?

Hedy Epstein: Probably not only because I went to Palestine, but because of what I did there and what I saw there. I participated in demonstrations against the occupation, and that makes me a security risk, I guess, and a terrorist. Peaceful non-violent resistance, the Israelis consider to be terrorism. And yet, what they do in response to peaceful non-violent resistance is the true terrorism, because they shoot teargas at demonstrators, who are Israelis, Palestinians and internationals. They use what they call rubber bullets, but it’s not a rubber bullet, it’s metal with a very thin coating of rubber around it and can kill you, they also use live ammunition and water cannons.

I experienced all of this, as a matter of fact, when in 2005, I participated again in non-violent resistance in Bi’lin village in Palestine. A sound bomb exploded right next to me, and I have lost some of my hearing as a result. But that is a minor thing compared to what the Palestinians have to endure every minute of every day and night. They are in a prison, they are prisoners. I can leave any time I want to. The Israeli security people might have detained me at the airport for several hours, but in the end, I can leave.

Silvia Cattori: How could they do that to a charming lady like you? You were upset with their violent treatment of you?

Hedy Epstein: Yes. But that’s not going to stop me, their mistreatment of me. Perhaps they did it to discourage me from coming back, but, of course, I have gone back and will be going back.

Silvia Cattori: After this terrible experience, when you returned to the United

States and you spoke about that, did people believe what happened to you?

Hedy Epstein: Some people believed my story, but then there are those in the mainstream Jewish community for whom Israel is always the victim, and the Palestinians are always the terrorists. They don't really understand, they don't really ask questions, and they don't really want to know what is truly going on. I made a commitment to the Palestinians that I met, all of whom asked me "When you go back to the United States, please, tell the American people what you have seen and what you have experienced". Because the American people don't know. I made that commitment, so I take every opportunity to speak about what I have seen and what I have experienced. And, yes, there are people within the Jewish mainstream community who want to shut me up. But that is not going to happen. They may call me names, but I am going to honour my commitment to the Palestinians.

Silvia Cattori: As a holocaust survivor, is it uncomfortable for you to denounce the brutality by the Israelis against the Palestinian people?

Hedy Epstein: I was never in a camp, because of my parent's sacrifice of getting me out, so I never had the worst kind of experience that survivors have had, but I know what it's like to be discriminated against. I knew Hitler's murderous intent between 1933 and 1939, during which time my father was sent to the concentration camp Dachau in 1938. He came back after four weeks, but he was no longer the same father that I knew, because he was an old, broken man when he came back.

And because I know what it's like, I feel I have a duty and a responsibility to fight the injustices that happen to other people. I can't do everything, and there are problems all over the world, but I decided that the Israeli government's treatment of the Palestinian people is an issue I am going to protest against, and I will try to do whatever I can.

The motto for holocaust survivors has been "Never again, " and " Remembering," and I certainly do my share of "Remembering ", but " Remembering" also has to have a present and a future perspective. You can't stop at "Remembering" and saying "Never again " probably meaning for Jews only. When I stood next to that terrible 25 foot high cement wall that Israel has built, separating Palestinian from Palestinian, I thought, "My God, this is what Jews are doing, the Jews that one time were forced behind walls, they are building a wall, and putting Palestinians behind that wall, and in the process destroying Palestinian buildings, homes, wells, but never hope, the Palestinian people are an amazing resilient, courageous people.

Silvia Cattori: I guess that after those experiences, your life changed completely? And that now you feel the need to go back to the place of this trauma?

Hedy Epstein: Yes. I need to go back to test what Israel says, that Gaza is free, that they are no longer occupying it. If they are really not in Gaza, I should be able to go this summer. And if I am prevented from going there, or have difficulties in getting there, that is going to show the world the lie that the Israelis are trying to sell saying they are no longer in Gaza. If they are no longer there, why would they be stopping me from going? This is like a test.

Silvia Cattori: Do you think that things are going from bad to worse and nothing will change until the solidarity movement is tougher with Israel?

Hedy Epstein: You never know if what we do will make a difference. So you have to keep on

trying, and not give up, and try something different, and this certainly is going to be different. And it may get the attention of the world, perhaps for the first time open their eyes and ears and minds to see what is really happening in Gaza.

Silvia Cattori: I understood that what concerns you very much is to try to make Jewish people and Jewish organisations more conscious that they are going to the wrong direction in refusing to recognize the Palestinians' sufferings and rights of dignity?

Hedy Epstein: If they really love Israel, the way they say they do, and they want it to continue, they should open their eyes and open their minds and see what Israel is doing and how wrong it is. If the Israelis want to be secure, they need to stop what they are doing and they need to turn around and stop the discriminations and the attacks on Palestinian people, and then both of them can live in peace and in harmony. And that is really what most of them want, but Israel is always blocking the way, with the support of American Jewry and the American government. It's wrong what they are doing; they are doing the very opposite of what they want to achieve.

Silvia Cattori: Most of the people monitoring what happens in Palestine are often accused by pro-Israelis of being anti-Semitic; do you try to explain that this is a wrong way to behave?

Hedy Epstein: I think, for Christians and Muslims, but especially for Christians, it's very difficult, much more difficult than for me as a Jew. If they speak out against the policies and practices of the Israeli government, they are going to be automatically called anti-Semitic. It's ridiculous to call me anti-Semitic; I am a Semite, so why would I be against myself? That's true for the Arabs as well. They ARE Semites. But, for Christians, I think it's very difficult, much more difficult, because it's true that some Christians have been anti-Semitic, and when they say that what Israel is doing is wrong, that makes them automatically anti-Semitic in the eyes of some Jews.

Silvia Cattori: What do you say to those people who accuse you of being an anti-Semite?

Hedy Epstein: I haven't been able to reach many of the Jewish organizations; they don't want to hear from me. So, I have not been successful in getting them to hear the story of what is happening in their names. When I am invited to speak to Christian groups, or non-Jewish groups, and Muslim groups, I have always been received with great love and politeness and friendship.

Silvia Cattori: Do you expect to touch the Israeli people hearts doing this expedition? Do you think that most of them will understand finally that something must change, that brutality will not solve the problem?

Hedy Epstein: When I was in Palestine, and I encountered Israeli soldiers, I took every opportunity that I had to try and talk to them and ask them about themselves, who they are, and what they are doing and why they are doing it. I tried to urge them to talk about themselves, and how they would feel if what they do would happen to one of their family members, to their grandmother, to their father. How do you feel about that; if you don't want that to happen, don't do it to somebody else.

Silvia Cattori: Were they sometimes open to listening to you?

Hedy Epstein: Only one soldier said to me, "I will think about it." Whether he did or not, I'll never know. But let me tell you an amusing experience with an Israeli soldier. There were several of us who tried to go somewhere in Palestine. This was a film group, and I went along with them. In the morning before we left, we put our backpacks in the trunk of this car. I saw a soccer ball in the car, and I said, "Could I borrow the soccer ball?"

They said " Yes, but what do you want to do with this?" I said, "I don't know." They said "Sure." So I was walking around holding this soccer ball, and we came to this flying checkpoint. A flying checkpoint is not a regular checkpoint; it's when Israeli soldiers just get a couple of jeeps and block off the roads and won't let anybody through. So this soldier told all of us Americans that we could go through except the soundman. He was Palestinian, although he had an Israeli ID. He wasn't allowed to go through. We begged, and we pleaded. But the soldier said, "No, he cannot go through, the rest of you can but he cannot", and so we were at a deadlock, because we weren't going without him. So I just tossed the ball to the soldier, then he tossed it back to me. We tossed it back and forth for a while, and then he said, "OK, the soundman can go through." That was a happy ending, but that shows also the arbitrariness of the decision-making.

Silvia Cattori: This gives you some optimism about the human beings?

Hedy Epstein: Well I can tell you that when I go to Gaza, I'll have a ball with me. Not a soccer ball, but a little ball.

Silvia Cattori: So, you will be on the waters this summer, going to Gaza: do you care if the Israelis army expel you in a rude way?

Hedy Epstein: No. The worst that the Israelis have done to me has already happened, and that was when I was internally searched at the Ben Gurion Airport in January of 2004. That is the worst, and they never ever are going to make me feel any worse than that. This time, they will have to search all 70 of us.

1) <http://www.hedyepstein.com/>

2) www.freegaza.org

3 <http://www.counterpunch.org/cattori06072007.html>

<http://www.voltairenet.org/article148842.html>

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