

MW - a brief history

One icy February morning in 2001, five women approached the checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem – Checkpoint 300 – and stood at the edge of the wadi wondering what to do next. We were an odd bunch, sleepy and nervous. We hardly knew each other, or what our purpose was, much less how to go about it. A soldier came up to us, half-surprised, half-threatening, his M16 pointed idly in our direction.. 'What are you doing here. You can't go beyond this point.' Dissent in our group was immediately visible. Those who were prepared to reveal themselves versus those preferring discretion as the better part of valour. Finally, one of the bolder ones, not wishing to offend her colleagues at that early stage, looked around the desolate scene for inspiration. The sun was rising over Har Homa. 'Why we've only come to enjoy the sunrise' she said. The soldier grunted. 'That's ok then. But not beyond this point, its very dangerous.' He trudged back to his colleagues and we watched as a trickle of people began to cross the checkpoint. We edged further and further towards Bethlehem and soon, unimpeded, we walked across and back and around, taking possession of what was to become our project, our obsession over the coming years. When we left we thanked the soldiers and said goodbye, see you again. We were exhilarated, empowered – and totally bewildered by what we had seen.

That, MachsomWatchers, is the constituting story of how we began, not with a bang but – well with a lot of confusion, hesitation and uncertainty. The five pioneers were Ronnee Jaeger, Adi Kuntsman, Yehudit Keshet, Yael Lavi-Jenner and one other woman, Stephanie Black who came because Ronnee twisted her arm.

We did not take that first walk into the unknown entirely unprepared. The idea of checkpoint observers was one that had been around for some time, Ronnee had been involved in a similar project in Guatemala . In those first months of Intifada, the press reports of abuses at checkpoints were frequent and compelling. It was, however, a talk by Amira Hass that inspired Ronnee to actually do something. She called a meeting of women willing to consider becoming observers and although only two or three of those present became active, it was from that modest beginning that MW grew. Without Ronnee, we might still be thinking about checkpoints. There was some concern that we might not 'be allowed' to stand at checkpoints, debate about whether we should have some insignia or not, and if so what. Legal advice assured us (and its worth remembering) that the army has no right to prevent citizens from being present in the area of the checkpoint unless a closed military area is declared and a document signed by the area commander or other senior officer presented.

Our first recruits were from Women in Black, again thanks to Ronnee and Adi who canvassed them most diligently. Some, like Roni Hammerman were instantly convinced, others were more hesitant. We decided from the outset that men would not be active observers, for the reasons so often explained: their difficulty in remaining neutral in relation to military personnel and situations. Also, we were aware of the disempowerment faced by women in mixed organizations..

We definitely saw ourselves as a radical, even subversive movement, civilians challenging the military on its own ground. No longer content to be palmed off with stories about 'security requirements' or excuses that acts of violence were 'exceptions'.

Yet we set ourselves three very modest goals: monitoring the behaviour of the military, monitoring/protecting (!) Palestinian human and civil rights, and bearing witness in the form of reports after each observation. It was Adi who undertook to organise the reporting procedure and who set up the computer system, which, although it has undergone many changes and revisions, is the basis for reporting to this day.

In those early days the Bethlehem checkpoint consisted of a couple of concrete blocks and a sentry post. Within weeks of that first visit we noted the series of transformations leading to ever more massive, threatening and impenetrable proportions. For the longest time, at least into 2003, it was possible to try and circumvent the checkpoint through the wadi to the east or Tantur Ecumenical Centre to the west. The grounds of Tantur were a favourite spot with Border policeman since they could take detainees there and 'interrogate' them out of sight/sound. On those early observations we had numerous occasions to enter Tantur and challenge policemen; we even enlisted the help of the Tantur management since the grounds were extra-territorial and officially off-limits to Israeli security forces. Unfortunately, our frequent appeals for on-the-spot action were usually in vain. Maya Rosenfeld and her team, Lauren Erdrich and Haya Ofek, left an invaluable record of those early days in their weekly reports during 2001-2003 which expanded to include El Hadr, Halhoul and the surrounding villages. Maya speaks fluent Arabic which enabled the team to garner a lot of insider information from local residents.

In the early stages we reported only on Bethlehem checkpoint because of its accessibility (those were the days!) and because we were so few (by April 2001 around 30 women with perhaps two or three observations per week) that we couldn't spread ourselves too thin. As our numbers increased, Norah Orlow took over the thankless task of coordinating the time-table. She ruled us with a rod of iron and nobody dared not to turn up for their shift. The organized time-table did wonders for us all because it gave us a feeling of being a real organization/movement as well as engendering commitment and accountability. Ronnee continued with recruitment, Adi with reporting and computerisation and Yehudit sought out new checkpoints. Information about their whereabouts was gleaned from press reports, expeditions into the West Bank and also information from Palestinians. In this way we discovered 'the container', Huwarra, Surda (now defunct) and saw for the first time the blockades of villages along Route 443. At that time, the existence of these blockades was not known to the public.

On one famous occasion we received a phone call from a Palestinian urging us to visit Sawahre el Sharkia (our friend the container) checkpoint where Border Police abuses were rampant. The two Yehudits (Elkana and Keshet) set out for the unknown in the Elkana car, literally over hill and dale, through Jebel Mukaber and over dirt tracks now alas inaccessible and blocked by the army. Finally we found the checkpoint, totally deserted since the guards had gone off on patrol. A lone Palestinian car drove up from Wadi Nar. The driver lifted the barrier left by the guards, drove through and politely replaced the barrier behind him.

On another occasion Keshet disguising herself as a settler conducted the team through the West Bank. By mistake they ended up at a Palestinian checkpoint. In no time at

all the commander was summoned and politely escorted them back, via Beth Sahour, to an Israeli checkpoint below Har Homa, then still under construction. A happy, dreadlocked, soldier, clearly enjoying his isolation to console himself with some substance or other, emerged from a tent, wished everyone a lovely day and retired back to what ever pleasures he was indulging in. A similar adventure to the outskirts of Ramallah ended also with the team's polite but very firm. despatch by Palestinian security.

We 'discovered' a checkpoint (now removed? on Route 443, near Ofer Camp where we were cautioned, kindly, not to go to 'another checkpoint east of here. Its too dangerous for ladies like you.' It was of course Qalandia where we had been active for several months – here too we witnessed its evolution from a couple of concrete blocks and two or three soldiers to the monstrosity it has become today.

A very unpopular shift, considered 'boring' was the one to Abu Dis, or rather the Border Police position just below Har HaZeytim at Ras al Amud, almost opposite the Moskovitch complex. Because the road from Jericho leading up to, and away from, the checkpoint was narrow there was always a long back-up of traffic although, at least in our presence, it flowed rather smoothly with only relatively rare detentions. The BP were very chummy and would offer coffee which was invariably refused. Imagine the surprise when the reluctant shift turned up one day in August 2002 to find that the checkpoint had disappeared. The team set off in search of it, only to find themselves slap up against a wall down the middle of what had been the main street of Abu Dis – the small wall that later evolved into the monstrous Wall itself. Quite a surprise. How naïve we were – we were even surprised when our attempts to have the wall removed met with polite, but very definite refusal. Other attempts to alleviate the plight of schoolchildren trapped on the eastern side were equally fruitless.

During 2001 our numbers continued to grow and the Troika, Ronnee, Adi and Yehudit the original decision-making body, decided to involve some of the more active women in the process – and so Org was born: Norah Orlow, Yehudit Elkana, Ivonne Mansbach, Roni Hammerman, Nava Eliashar, Maya Rosenfeld, Maya Blum who designed the original logo. We called ourselves the Pioneering Ten.

Most Org members took it for granted that MW was a radical organization. There was an unspoken agreement that we would not set ideological lines, any woman willing to 'oppose the occupation', however she defined that, was welcome to join us. There was some dispute about this decision but in spite of all that has happened since, it was a wise one. MW has lost its radical, feminist edge but has gained in the sheer numbers of women involved. This has enabled a more comprehensive and systematic observation of checkpoints. Towards the middle of 2002, at the insistence of new members wishing to be more active, it was decided to open Org to any woman interested in attending. Org retained its position as the decision-making body of MW. At that time MW numbered less than 100 women (the great explosion in numbers came in 2003 with the founding of a Tel-Aviv group and in 2004 following the article 'Many Mothers' by Sima Kadmon in Yediot Achronot). With the expansion of Org came the decision to retain MW as a voluntary movement with no paid staff. There was a concomitant decision to avoid fundraising. (We did receive an unsolicited donation of \$5,000 from an elderly American who wanted us to hand out cookies to

the soldiers. After much internal dispute we took the donation, informing him that it was earmarked for transportation costs).

New members were provided with an orientation session and taken out with experienced teams. We urged teams to hold 'Affinity Groups' – that is before each shift to discuss together possible scenarios with a plan of action how to respond in each case. Team members were encouraged to inform the group of any disabilities, infirmities or needs. Flyers were prepared that explained MW respectively to the soldiers, to the Palestinians and to newcomers. Before too long, the flyers became redundant and MW was well enough known that the appearance of teams on the scene, complete with badge, was taken for granted. We would encounter guards at different checkpoints who would greet us like old friends, or enemies. 'Hey aren't you from Watch?' Yes, they cursed us too, sometimes ignored us but there were also those who actually thanked us for coming.

Quite early on, possibly in May or June 2001, we were approached by the army, or rather a representative from the Etzion DCO offering us assistance and providing a phone number, quite a precedent. By this time we had broken our own rule, never to intervene at checkpoints except in cases of physical or verbal violence against Palestinians. The pattern of trying to help people to cross, to release detainees and so on and help in individual cases was established, so we were delighted with this development. Alas, the Major did not live up to his promise and was seldom of much help. Later meetings with officers, including the then Commander of the Border Police, Ya'akov Zur, the then Commander of the Ramallah area Roni Numan and then head of the Civil Administration Ilan Paz. We attended those meetings with a sense of empowerment and entitlement, anticipating that the issues we raised would be properly addressed. As usual we were fobbed off with the 'contact list' which sometimes meant help in individual cases while the general situation at checkpoints, and their underlying policy continued, and, worse, deteriorated. The officers' willingness to engage with MW was certainly motivated by a desire to reinforce the image of the world's 'most humane army' but was also a way of ensuring that we were not going to be trouble-makers: taking the sting from our tail. Its ironic that given MW's move towards the humanitarian/educational mode, the army from the upper echelons down, has become increasingly hostile and obstructive. Similarly, a meeting with the former Attorney General, Elkiam Rubenstein whom we had encountered as a 'humanitarian' volunteer at Qalandia, turned out to be a pointless exercise.

Then as now, the line between contact with the military and collaboration with them was a very fine one. In retrospect, it might have been better had we not availed ourselves of this 'assistance'. This would have diminished our 'fire-fighting' capacity, but would have strengthened our position as radical opposition.

The increase in membership from 2003 onwards, inevitably brought new blood and enabled the expansion of activities. It also brought new needs and new tensions. Yet one of MW's important achievements is having attracted so many strong, committed women to our ranks and providing a framework in which everyone is enabled to contribute to the best of her abilities. We cannot turn back the clock to those days of more or less ideological homogeneity, almost of innocence. But its important not to

forget them either. It would be sad indeed that having come so far with what is really a unique movement, we were to become yet another not-for-profit organization with the rather unclear goals of raising public consciousness and showing the humanitarian face of Israel. There's an occupation out there, it is vicious and immoral and we need to be clearly on the side of opposition with no holds barred.

Yehudit Keshet