

Prologue

ON JANUARY 10, 1999, a group of Palestinian men belonging to the Fatah party organized a nonviolent demonstration protesting the closure of the Ibrahimi Mosque and the curfew placed on the thirty thousand Palestinians living in the part of Hebron under Israeli control. The Israeli military had imposed the curfew a week earlier after two Israeli settler women were injured, one seriously, when Palestinian militants shot at their van near the Mosque. The Christian Peacemaker Team in Hebron heard about the demonstration and went to observe.

Holding long banners reading, “No For Closure of Ibrahimi Mosque,” and “No For Collective Punishment,” a group of seventy to one hundred Palestinians marched from the Hebron municipal offices to the border that separates the Palestinian and Israeli-controlled areas. As the marchers approached, the Israeli soldiers and border police—armed with rubber-coated metal bullets, tear gas, and sound grenades—took positions behind large cement barriers, ready to fire.

CPTers Pierre Shantz, Sara Reschly and Joanne “Jake” Kaufman jumped in front of the soldiers and their guns, crying, “This is a nonviolent demonstration! They are not throwing rocks!” The soldiers, not knowing how to respond, tried to push the CPTers away. Some lowered their M-16 rifles, but other soldiers threw sound grenades that sent the crowd scurrying. After the demonstration’s leadership calmed the Palestinians observing and participating in the demonstration, the crowd returned, standing face to face with the soldiers.

Older Palestinians leading the procession circulated among the youth, telling them not to throw rocks. After about thirty minutes of this standoff, soldiers began pushing the Palestinians. The marchers started to run away and some threatened to stone the troops. Soldiers quickly moved into firing positions; CPTers again got in the way, standing in front of the rifles and saying, “This is a nonviolent demonstration!” Only

a couple of rocks were thrown before the Palestinian leaders restrained the youth. No one was injured.

One of the military officers, furious with the CPTers for interfering, began shouting in the faces of CPTers Mark Frey and Shantz, telling them to leave the area. Shantz retorted that the demonstration was nonviolent, and the officer slapped him twice. At another point, a soldier physically restrained Kaufman as she tried to stand in front of soldiers taking aim. When the Israeli civilian police arrived, the enraged officer demanded that they arrest Shantz and Reschly. The police also detained Sydney Stigge-Kaufman for a short time on location, and then released her.

The remaining CPTers circulated among the crowd or positioned themselves between soldiers and Palestinians. About an hour and a half after the demonstration began, the Palestinian leadership called for everyone to pray in the street to defuse mounting tension. The older men lined up on rugs to pray, calling for the younger ones to join them. An Israeli Druze officer circulated among soldiers, telling them to stay calm; in Arabic, he encouraged Palestinian youth to join the prayers. After praying, the leaders declared the demonstration finished and called for everyone to return to the Palestinian area. No clashes developed after the demonstration ended.

A Palestinian leader formally thanked CPTers after the march, saying, "Thank you. You have done your work."

"The success of the intervention was due to three things," Shantz reported later. "The discipline of the men on their way to pray, the efforts of the Druze Border Police officer, and our standing between the soldiers and the demonstrators. If any one of those three things had been missing, someone would have gotten shot. There was one officer there who obviously wanted to shoot someone."¹

The authorities charged Shantz with "pushing two border police and hitting one on the helmet" and "interfering with police doing their duty." They charged Reschly with "yelling 'don't shoot' at soldiers," and "assaulting a soldier," i.e., pushing him. Reschly and Shantz told the court their commitment to nonviolence would prohibit them pushing or hitting anyone. A third charge by a Russian-speaking soldier that Reschly called him a Nazi was dropped after the court discovered that he did not speak English. Video footage of the event later shown on Israeli TV proved that

1. The soldier, known to the team as "Avi" was to have several negative interactions with the team in the next few years. See chapter 6.

Reschly and Shantz had intervened nonviolently. The court told Shantz and Reschly to hand in their passports and 2,000 shekels bail each while the police investigated the incident for two weeks. After that time, the police returned the passports and money (which had been raised on the spot at their hearing by Israeli and international supporters), and dropped all charges.

The January 1999, CPT intervention in Hebron is the sort of experience that most members of Christian Peacemaker Teams dream of having. They were accompanying a Palestinian group that had, on its own, organized a solid, nonviolent demonstration. At the crucial time, CPTers were able to intervene to prevent violence against unarmed demonstrators. The Palestinian organizers, the Israeli Druze officer, and the CPTers all had a role in stopping soldiers from shooting. An Associated Press photo of Reschly and a Palestinian man² standing in front of soldiers with arms outspread went all over the world, testifying to the effectiveness of unarmed peace activists. Finally, video footage of the event, as well as Reschly and Shantz's arrest for "Getting in the Way" mustered the support and enthusiasm of Israelis, Palestinians, and internationals for CPT's work in Hebron.

But "dream" is the operative word of the last paragraph. For every encounter in which CPT volunteers have been at the right place at the right time to prevent violence, they have spent hundreds of hours drinking tea on routine visits to families more interested in talking about the small details of their lives than theory and practice of nonviolence. They have spent hundreds of hours documenting violence that happened before CPT could prevent it, hundreds of hours planning nonviolent strategies and public witnesses that in the end bore little fruit.

In this book, I hope to cover both the dream moments and the mundane realities of Christian Peacemaker Team's work since 1986. For adding to the pool of knowledge about Nonviolent Direct Action strategies, the dream moments are probably most useful. A cloud of nonviolent witnesses since the time of Jesus Christ has gifted CPT with examples of courageous, effective resistance to evil. CPTers have learned from them, modified their strategies, and in turn inspired other organizations to confront violence without using violence. However, writing about the mistakes CPT has made, its floundering as the organization found its voice,

2. The man was a Hebron municipal observer who, sadly—since he was more at risk than Reschly—went unnamed.

and the negative consequences of certain CPT actions, also adds to the pool.

The poet Adrienne Rich writes about casting her lot with those “who age after age, perversely / with no extraordinary power / reconstitute the world.”³ While many CPTers do have extraordinary abilities, most accomplish what they do simply by following the extraordinary example of Jesus Christ, who nonviolently got in the way of systems that dealt in death and exploitation. As ordinary people, they have changed CPT from a small initiative of the historic peace churches to an expanding, ecumenical, nonviolent movement—a movement that has called other ordinary people to put their bodies and faith on the line to accompany the oppressed, and create space for dialogue and reconciliation.

Writing a history at this time may seem premature. The full power of organized, faith-based Nonviolent Direct Action probably has not manifested itself yet. However, the institutional memory of the early days of CPT has already begun to slip, as this author has found during her research. Knowing how a small, struggling initiative grew into a bigger, widely respected organization in twenty years may prove useful to other small struggling nonviolent initiatives in the years to come.

3. Rich, “Natural Resources,” in *Dream of a Common Language*.