**CHAPTER 2**

**STEPPING OUT:**

**WOMEN IN BLACK TRAVELS TO THE USA, ITALY AND THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA**

***1: In a matter of months:***

***to the United States of America***

Women in Black as an idea and a practice travelled from Israel across the Atlantic to the USA with surprising speed. Jewish women peace activists in the USA were alert to developments in Israel Palestine and, like their counterparts there, had been spurred into greater action by the outbreak of the *intifada.* In mid-1988, around six months after the Jerusalem women enacted their very first Women in Black vigil, the US women were imitating their fresh and striking mode of action in weekly vigils in a number of American towns and cities.

The Jewish population of the USA is more than five million, at least half of whom are thought to be non-religious and unaffiliated to anything formally Jewish. There exist nonetheless plentiful Jewish organizations, including Jewish Federations in many towns and cities, represented in a National Council. There is an overarching body called the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (the ‘Presidents’ Conference’ for short). The leadership of these structures, and of the four major denominations of synagogue (Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Modern Orthodox) constitute what is sometimes termed ‘the Jewish establishment’. In this establishment, as in the Jewish public at large, there is a great deal of hotly debated difference of opinion concerning Israel, its government’s policies and the Palestinian problem. [Footnote 1]

The earliest WiB vigil in the USA, so far as I have heard, was that of a lesbian group in Minneapolis. They called themselves the ‘Hannah Arendt Lesbian Peace Patrol’, and they started gathering in February 1988. They participated in an organization called the Minnesota Women’s Alliance to End the Occupation, which was composed of Jewish, Palestinian and other US women, and with them held a weekly vigil during the summer of 1988 in solidarity with the Israeli WiB vigils in Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv. Sharon Jaffe, one of the group, wrote that

standing vigil is both scary and empowering. Scary because we are outside, subject to misogynist and homophobic angry men... The stress is counterbalanced by the empowerment of breaking silence and the growing support of women in Minneapolis and St.Paul, women in Israel, women in Palestine, women around the United States. The vigils are both empowering and effective because women of varying class backgrounds, Jewish identities and sexualities, listen, consider, and begin to slowly, slowly and courageously open their hearts (Falbel et al 1990:60).

**The creation of the Jewish Women’s Committee to End the Occupation**

Soon after Women in Black vigilling got going in Minnesota and elsewhere in the USA, various of the local groups came together to create the Jewish Women’s Committee to End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The initiative of three women – Clare Kinberg, Irena Klepfisz and Grace Paley - JWCEO was based in New York. Its founding document stated specifically that it had come into being ‘in solidarity with Women in Black and other Israeli and Palestinian women’s groups working for peace’. And its aim was stated, like theirs, as being ‘to end the Occupation’, and for that purpose to ‘support negotiations between the Israeli Government and the PLO toward the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside Israel’ (ibid:6).

JWCEO vigils, though they adopted the WiB ‘look’, differed in some ways from those in Jerusalem. They were held on a Monday, rather than a Friday. And instead of choosing to gather at major traffic intersections, the women mounted their vigils in Jewish neighbourhoods, near synagogues and Jewish organizations, because their main aim, in these early days, was to urge their leaders to foster discussion on the Israeli crisis, and to attract more Jews, and particularly Jewish women, into activism around the issue. In New York for instance their vigil confronted the office of the Presidents’ Conference at 515 Park Avenue.

The JWCEO also began to hold regular meetings and to publish a bulletin - the *Jewish Women’s Peace Bulletin*. In their second year of activity, 1989, they organized a number of significant events. In January 1989, they brought two activists to the USA from Israel: Mariam Mar’i, an Israeli Palestinian, and Edna Zarelski (an Israeli Jew). They organized a speaking tour to ten cities, in which Mariam and Edna shared the platform and spoke in dialogue about their relationship with women of the Palestinian communities in the Occupied Territories. A couple of months later, In March 1989, JWCEO participated in mounting a conference in New York. Organized by mainstream, rather than women’s, organizations, it was called ‘Road to Peace’ and was possibly the first event in the USA co-sponsored by an Israeli Jewish organization (a magazine called *New Outlook*) and a Jerusalem-based Palestinian paper (*Al Fajr*)*.* The media coverage was greater than anyone could have imagined likely, and the event seems to have had astonishing appeal for the public: the list of those waiting for available tickets ran to six thousand. Women however were poorly represented, despite the best efforts of the JWCEO activists (ibid:66). Then in Boston, in June 1989, the women mounted an exhibition in the Oral History Center titled ‘A Passion for Life: Stories and Folk Arts of Palestinian and Jewish Women’. They displayed embroidery, ceramics, basketry, jewelry, family photos, amulets and cooking utensils belonging to eight Jewish and Palestinian women living in Eastern Massachusetts. The organizers wrote, ‘The stories and works of art in our exhibition include descriptions of the tragedy of the Palestinian diaspora and the oppression of Palestinian people under Israeli occupation’ (ibid:64). Later in that same busy year, on 2 October 1989, groups in many other locations across the US and Canada participated in the first nationally coordinated Jewish women’s peace action. They called it ‘Jewish Women’s Call for Peace – Days of Awe’. It involved vigils followed by speeches and performances, in which they reported the condition of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. They told of the hundreds of deaths during the *intifada* to date (including the deaths of sixty-seven women), the many woundings, and the tens of thousands of arrests and imprisonings. They described the cruel conditions of ‘administrative detention’ in which some 1,900 Palestinians were currently being held. And they reported on the aid – food, medicines, blood donations - that Israeli Jews and Palestinians of the peace movement were furnishing to the Palestinian communities with whom they were maintaining contact in the Territories (ibid:22). In May 1991 Sherry Gorelick was sponsored by the JWCEO vigil group in New York to attend the Women’s Geneva Conference for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, in the Palais des Nations, Geneva. She reported back in *Bridges* journal, noting that this was the first meeting following the Gulf war in which women from Israel, from Palestine (four women attended from the Territories), and from thirteen other countries had come together. The conference was not exactly feminist, she wrote, but was definitely ‘of women’. Its final document was a strong call for international intervention – they supplied a long list of needed actions - to assist Palestinians on the road to justice and statehood (Gorelick 1991).

The response the Women in Black received from Jews they encountered in and around the Jewish centres where they held their vigils was expressive of the fierce differences of political opinion noted above. Rita Falbel wrote, ‘Sometimes people talk to us. Some shout and argue, some call us names. Others take heart from our presence, and a few join in. We’re not a large group, but that doesn’t matter. It feels right to be out there,’ (Falbel et al 1990:13). Clare Kinberg wrote of an occasion when they were attacked by Jewish Defense League Kahanists, ‘young guys in their 20s or 30s, fanatically raving about the Torah and Jewish rights...screaming “You are not Jewish, you defile the Jewish people”,’ (ibid:21). Irena Klepfisz said, ‘Over and again, we were told that the vigil was not only disloyal but a form of collaboration with contemporary and historical Nazis,’ (ibid:39). This was the big dilemma for Women in Black activists as the practice of vigilling spread in the USA: that any criticism of the state of Israel risked being deemed ‘antisemitic’, and the critic a ‘self-hating Jew’. Irena Klepfisz wrote, ‘When anti-Semites use the analogy [of the Holocaust] their intent is to negate German or world guilt. But when concerned, passionate Jews use the analogy, they are also trying to express their outrage over Israeli action and to shake other Jews out of their apathy over the fate of the Palestinians’ (ibid:40). Women in Black activists had to be very careful to do ‘both / and’, to highlight the historic persecution of Jews as well as contemporary Jewish oppression of Palestinians. Thus, in advertising the exhibition at the Oral History Center mentioned above, the Boston women wrote not only of the Palestinian stories illustrated therein but also ‘the terrible persecution which Jewish people have endured throughout history, most horrifyingly manifested in Europe during World War II’. They said, ‘We bring these stories together in one exhibition not to suggest any simple parallels but to create a vision broad enough to embrace them all,’ (ibid:64). San Francisco Women in Black for their part advertised themselves in the following even-handed terms.

We are Jewish and Palestinian women. We are concerned Americans. We stand in solidarity with Jewish and Palestinian women in Israel and elsewhere working for peace in the Middle East. We stand in protest against the continuing violence of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people. *We stand in affirmation of the right of both peoples to self-determination, a secure existence and peace.* We stand in mourning: for those who have died, for the human rights that have been violated, for the moral values that have been lost (ibid:63). (My italics).

As Women in Black vigilling of the JWCEO kind spread during 1988 and 1989 to more and more US – and indeed also to Canadian – locations, other women, not necessarily Jewish, were being similarly inspired to vigil in WiB style around different instances of violence, militarism and war. The Gulf War in 1990-91 prompted many to go out on the streets protesting against US involvement. I visited the USA in 2004 and later reported on two characteristic, and characteristically different, Women in Black vigils with whom I stood when visiting New York (Cockburn 2007). One was the Union Square vigil on a Thursday. Most of the women were Jewish women and their message focused exclusively on Israel Palestine. By the time I met them in 2004 this group had had two distinct lives. It had begun in 1988 soon after WiB in Israel started and, as there, vigilling ceased with the outbreak of the Gulf war. But it had revived with the onset of the second Palestinian *intifada* in 2000, and by 2004 the vigil was flourishing, with around thirty women regularly attending. I found it surprisingly non-silent, even chatty. ‘We just can’t keep quiet’, they told me. Besides, they explained, since they were not into holding meetings, their vigilling hour had to enable some exchange of information. The focus of the banners in Union Square was clearly on ending the Occupation – ‘Israeli and Palestinian women say the Occupation is killing us all’, one of them read. The group gave out informative leaflets about the situation in the region. Lila Braine told me, ‘It’s important for people to see us there and read our leaflets. It’s additional information. It helps to counteract all the misinformation there is about. It’s important to stand out there and say that not every Jew supports the Israeli government. It gives courage to other Jews’ (Cockburn 2007:59).

By contrast, the second vigil I attended, outside the Public Library in Manhattan on a Wednesday, made no reference to Israel or Palestine. It was one of the ‘general purpose’ WiB groups that had emerged and spread across the USA in the early 1990s in parallel with the specifically Israel-focused vigils. Its themes ranged from violence itself, including local incidents of racist violence or sexual violence against women, to any outbreak of aggression on the world stage. This particular group had first got together in 1993 – too late for the Gulf War, but in response to the nationalist violence in the disintegrating Yugoslavia. The women first demonstrated outside the United Nations building, but finding the Plaza draughty and the audience scarce, soon decided to move to the Public Library site. This group was smaller than that of Union Square - by the time of my visit there were no more than five or six regular active women. They not only maintained strict silence, but cherished it. Julie Finch told me, ‘We shall be silent, but we won’t be silenced. That’s a play on words I feel is powerful’ (Cockburn 2007:57). When the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 occurred they kept on standing, and called for ‘justice not vengeance’ - not an easy thing to do in the circumstances. One of the vigillers was Indira Kajosević, a Yugoslav student then in New York. She told me, ‘It was hard to be on the street at that time. We were spat on. But there were lots of women coming to us, needing something... The group received a lot of phone calls and e-mail messages at this time, from women across the USA, asking how they could start their own vigils’ (ibid.).

We shall hear more of these non-JWCEO WiB vigils in the USA in Chapter .. Meanwhile, let us go back to Israel and see how Italian women were drawn there, and adopted the Women in Black mode for themselves.

***2: Italian women go seeking ‘difficult places’***

Contact between Israeli and Italian women peace activists goes back to the late 1980s. At the start it involved women from the Italian cities of Turin and Bologna, travelling in the context of a project they called ‘Visiting Difficult Places’, *Visitare Luoghi Difficile*. By ‘difficult places’ they meant regions where people marked by significant ‘difference’, for instance of ethnicity, religion, culture or politics, were living together in a tense relationship. Lebanon was one such country the VLD group were drawn to study and visit. Israel was bound to be another. What was unique about the VLD approach was, as Elisabetta Donini explained it, that they had moved away from a static pacifist intent to an active relational one – a “path of solidarity”. ‘We are convinced,’ she wrote, ‘that conflicts cannot be considered resolved when one side imposes itself on others, but when the diversity of stories, of cultures, experiences and projects can recognize each other, reciprocate, and live together,’ (VLD 1988:5). [Footnote 2]

**Inspired by a difficult partnership: Israeli Jews and Palestinians**

An early Israeli contact for the Italian women was Michal Schwartz, an editor and journalist associated with the bilingual paper *Derech Hanitzotz/Tariq a Sharara* (‘The Spark’), who visited Italy in 1986. She was a member of the Israeli Nitzotz organization, the strongly anti-Zionist group that campaigned for an end to the Occupation by the radical ‘one state’ solution: turning Israel and the Territories into a single nation with equal citizenship of Jews and Palestinians. The Italian women of the VLD heard Michal speak about the *Intifada*, and the cooperation between Jewish feminist / peace activists and Palestinian women in the Territories. Michal put them in touch with women in Israel, whom they subsequently visited. They were deeply impressed by the ‘transversal’ activism they found going on there – particularly in Jerusalem. They were sure that cooperating with these women over a longer period would help develop their own thinking not only about this particular conflict but also more generally about the means of working with and transcending ‘difficult differences’.

The first major encounter between the Italian feminists and the Israeli Palestinian Women in Black activists was a gathering organized by a partnership of three Italian organizations: the Women’s House of Torino, the Women’s Documentation Centre of Bologna, and women of a nation-wide network named the Association for Peace. They called it the Peace Camp. It would be held from 20-30 August 1988 in a hotel in East Jerusalem (that is to say, in the Palestinian, occupied, part of the city) and it was planned to involve three or four days of seminars, on themes of health, schooling, jobs and conflict, followed by visits to Palestinian villages and refugee camps in the Territories. The Italian women hoped that it could be ‘a precious opportunity for comparison between experiences of women who in the daily life of a divided country often intersect without communicating’ (ibid:15), and that it would develop into something more permanent and ongoing between Israelis and Palestinians, such as a Women’s House in Jerusalem. Luisa Morgantini and Patrizia Dogliani travelled to Israel in June to prepare this August Peace Camp. When August came, a delegation of no less than sixty-eight Italian women travelled, each at her own expense, to the Peace Camp hosted by Israeli and Palestinian Women in Black in Jerusalem. There they learned (Elisabetta Donini later affirmed) that Women in Black was expressive of a two-fold struggle – for their status and rights as women, and for their survival and political expression as an ethnic group or groups, a people or peoples. ‘Gender is not “other” to, or separate from, social and military structures. Rather it is central to them. Thus, “liberation” (of women) and “freedom” (of peoples) are intertwined’ (ibid:3). [Footnote 3]

Back home from Jerusalem, the Italian women adopted the practice of vigilling in WiB style. In September 1988 ‘Donne in Nero’, as it was called in Italian, gathered in front of the Altare Della Patria in the Piazza Venezia in Rome, a powerful symbol of nationalism and militarism. And in October a number of vigilling women from different Italian towns came to Perugia-Assisi to march in a pacifist rally. In 1989 and early 1990 Donne in Nero vigilling spread to many more Italian locations, everywhere at this stage the focus being on the Israeli Occupation of the Palestinian territories, the Palestinian *intifada* and support for the ‘transversal’ political partnership being forged between peace-minded Jewish and Palestinian women.

When the Gulf War broke out in Autumn 1990 the Italian Peace Association sent out an appeal for action, and, in contrast to Israel Palestine, this conflict caused Italian vigilling groups to multiply, especially in the Centre and North of the country. In the years 1991 and 1992 it seems there were such groups in as many as eighty or ninety locations. In February 1991 four hundred women identifying as Donne in Nero attended a national meeting in Rome. A month later the Italian movement, for such it now was, organized a very well attended, and widely reported, multi-city vigil for which it gained a lot of publicity.

**A questionnaire to portray Italian Women in Black**

In 1992, a working group of women of Donne in Nero, principally from Turin, got together to think in some depth about Women in Black. They felt that, on the lines of the feminist aphorism ‘the personal is political’, ‘each woman who stood in a vigil became an individual protagonist with her own body of a direct assumption of responsibility against violence, abuse, war.’ The true meaning of the whole experience lay only in the ‘emotions, reflections, in the bodies, of the protagonists’. They therefore decided to send a questionnaire to the largest possible number of Donne in Nero groups in order to create from the responses something resembling ‘a group portrait’. They circulated the questionnaire to all the Italian vigils of which they knew at that time – more than eighty. The findings of this study are gathered in a paper (apparently unpublished) titled *The Italian Case: An Open Experience* (Casa delle Donne Torino 1993). [Footnote 4]

The survey report is interesting for having garnered a sense of the kind of phenomenon WiB was in Italy at that time. It is clear that the women of DiN were very varied and heterogenous. They were feminists, political militants, pacifists – some were religious. What they had in common was the need to express themselves to their own and other governments as deeply opposed to policies of militarism and war. DIN groups, they discovered, did not only vigil. They also frequently met for discussions, and some produced written reflections, leaflets and posters. Some groups developed a refusal to pay taxes destined to fund the military and a programme of diverting them to social causes instead. They concluded that WiB was ‘a very meaningful phenomenon still subject to development’ (Casa delle Donne Torino 1993).

The many WiB-style vigilling groups in Italy did not deem themselves an organization called ‘Donne in Nero’, ‘Women in Black’. Rather they *did* DiN, they *enacted* it. WiB was a practice rather than an entity. For all that, the women adhered to each other through their individual sense of identity, the subjectivity they experienced and expressed in that practice. The more important elements of the practice were four-fold, the responses to the questionnaire revealed.

First, the choice of *a place to stand* was significant. In order to ‘overtly show their disobedience’ the women chose locations ‘facing’ (perhaps ‘facing up to’ would express this more precisely) political authority. Thus they chose Parliament Square in Rome, and in other towns the vigillers would often choose the seat of government at that local level. Sometimes, to signal disrespect, they turned their shoulders to the building in question. For instance, they ‘cold shouldered’ the Parliament building in January 1991 when the Members of Parliament therein voted in favour of participating in the Gulf War.

The second element of WiB practice was *autonomy* – such that each vigil was an independent actor, and within it each woman was likewise autonomous. Standing there, she simply *was*: ‘I, a woman, against war’. In other words, each woman made a similar choice of action – but that action may have expressed different feelings for each of them.

The third element was the *silence* maintained by the vigils. The ‘I’ was simply the woman’s body standing motionless and silent. Women in Pisa wrote of themselves that they found silence difficult to maintain, it was ‘fatiguing’. Nonetheless they persisted in it. ‘We chose silence’, they wrote, ‘in order to listen better, in order to be listened to better.’

Fourth, and finally, the blackness was important, *the wearing of black* as expressive of mourning. Of course, women are often against their will confined to a space of tears and mourning. Some of the younger women did indeed for this reason express doubts about WiB’s black symbolism. But in DiN’s practice the ‘black’ was knowingly converted from something individual, private and imposed on women to something collective, public and chosen, in order to ‘transmit a message of rebellion’.

Discussing the findings of the questionnaire survey among themselves, however, it became clear to the women of Italian WiB that the element in their practice that had enabled it to endure over several years without losing meaning was something much more difficult to define and explain than these four simple matters of place, autonomy, silence and blackness. It was the centrality in their practice of a challenging, and therefore productive, *contradiction*: they worked with and for women on both sides of a conflict. They could not and did not take sides. This was what WiB inherited from the Italian women’s earlier experience in the project of ‘visiting difficult places’. They had learned to understand ‘conflict’ in a non-violent sense, seeing it not as the attempt to annihilate an ‘other’ but as a hard-work practice of relationship with that ‘other’.

In ‘visiting difficult places’ such as Lebanon and Israel Palestine, they had learned a lot about handling contradiction. For example: in thinking about ‘war’ and ‘peace’. They had come to understand war as ‘outrage and negation’. Yet, if they were honest, they had to look back and remember their old allegiances with the fighters of wars of liberation, for instance in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. What should they think of that now? Should they perhaps frame their current activism not as being ‘against war’ but as being ‘for peace’? The problem persists however, and it is not just semantic. ‘Peace’, as a concept, can seem ‘too easy’, denying ‘difference’, suggesting a ‘false serenity’. So, using their VLD experience, the Italian women of Donne in Nero attempted to frame ‘the idea of peace in dynamic perspective’, ‘not as tranquillity but the labour of acknowledging differences among ourselves and differences from others’. In that same spirit, WiB became a space in which to strive to rework one’s own identity and subjectivity in negotiating between political differences.

As they completed their analysis of the questionnaire survey of Italian Women in Black in 1993, the authors of the report felt bound to conclude that ‘we haven’t stopped any wars’. The State of Israel and the PLO were still at loggerheads. The Gulf War had run its course. On the other hand, they were able to feel that vigilling in WiB style had become established as ‘the most intense way of expressing a rejection of violence’, and around this practice they had succeeded in creating ‘a thin but resilient network’. The Italian women liked to speak of a ‘black thread’ of ‘symbolic contagion’ that linked the early Israel-focused vigils with subsequent vigils opposing the Gulf War. In the latter the Italian government were themselves a belligerent, so the women were now obliged directly to oppose their own state. As Luisa Morgantini put it in an article in the newspaper *Il Manifesto* in February 1991, ‘today the black colour we are wearing is really our own’ (reported in Casa delle Donne Torino 1993). When the Gulf War ended, there was one memorable national meeting in Florence – it was February 1992. Soon after that, however, vigilling activity slowed down almost to nil. The black thread ran onwards, however, for Italian WiB would begin to play a significant role on the wider stage, as we shall now see.

**3 Disobedient Women:**

**WiB comes to the Yugoslav region**

 So, yes, it was Italian women who had become active as ‘Donne in Nero’ who would now carry the idea and practice of Women in Black to the countries that were emerging from the disintegrating Federation of Yugoslavia. North-eastern Italy has a common border with Slovenia, one of the former regions of Yugoslavia. In June 1991 this became the first of the Yugoslav regions to acquire independent statehood, with its capital in Llubljana. Two months later, women of Donne in Nero in the city of Venice and its neighbouring Mestre region made a cross-border move to contact Slovenian women, and shared a vigil with them in the town of Capodistria (Koper). Soon afterwards the Venice-Mestre WiBs travelled to meet women in Zagreb, the city that by October would become the capital of another independent republic: Croatia (Casa delle Donne 1993:9). A special impact however was achieved by the transmission of the Woman in Black idea to a group of energetic women in Belgrade, capital of the emerging entity of Serbia. This link was effected first by Italian women of Donne in Nero from Turin, soon followed by women from Spain where WiB had come into existence as Mujeres de Negro.

A little history may be useful here. [Footnote 5] The ‘southern Slavs’, for whom Yugoslavia is named, had populated the Balkan region since the sixth century CE, but over time had become differentiated by religion, with distinctive populations of Catholic and Orthodox Christians emerging in the Middle Ages, loyal respectively to Rome and Byzantium. A substantial Muslim population was contributed by four hundred years of Ottoman rule from the late 14th century. Ethno-religious rivalry was thus endemic in the region. National movements developed in the late 19th and early 20th century, leading to the creation of a ‘Kingdom of Slovenes, Serbs and Croatians’, which, renamed ‘Kingdom of Yugoslavia’ in 1929, survived until the Second World War. When, in 1941, the Axis forces invaded, they found ready support from the fascist Ustaše movement among Croatians.

The principal resistance to the Nazi forces was that of communist Partisans led by Josip Broz Tito. When the war ended in 1945, Tito emerged to take political control, creating a one-party Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. At first the state was positioned within the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. But in 1948 Tito distanced himself from Stalin to build a more open and non-aligned communist state with a mixed economy. Tito’s aim was to do away with differences of religious identification and unify all Yugoslavs in communism. In this way a strong socialist and secular Yugoslav identity developed among a post-war generation that viewed nationalism as an error of the past. It was not to last, however. Tito died in 1980, leaving a power vacuum. The USA and other capitalist countries, seeking to eradicate communism wherever it appeared, pressed neo-liberal economic reforms on Yugoslavia. The result was rocketing unemployment, a deepening of class inequalities and growing social unrest. Political elites in the several republics re-invoked nationalist feelings to boost their power, and in multi-party elections held in 1990 nationalist parties prevailed everywhere. As a result, Federal Yugoslavia disintegrated, eventually leading to the creation of the distinct nation states of Serbia-Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Slovenia. The nationalist leaders’ ideal of ‘pure’ mono-ethnic states was however impossible to realize, for, on the ground, the ethnicities were irretrievably mixed. The most bitter fighting ensued in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where between 1992 and 1995 Croat and Serb forces fought each other and the Bosnian Muslims (44% of the population) for control of parts of the country. The Bosnian war is estimated to have caused 100,000 deaths and displaced more than two million people from their homes. This conflict was particularly notorious for the abuse of women - possibly 20,000, predominantly Bosniaks (Muslims) were raped as an act of war (Magas 1993, Woodward 1995 and Silber and Little 1995).

The early 1990s were the tumultuous context in which Women in Black began in the former Yugoslav region. There was already something of a women’s movement there. Way back in the 1970s a number of feminist initiatives had started in the major cities – Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. In the 1980s the League of Communists’ had introduced formal sex-equality policies. In reality, men continued to dominate the Party bureaucracy and public enterprises, but Yugoslav women grew accustomed in that decade at least to a certain civility and the expectation of access to most forms of employment (Morokvasić 1986). They were therefore profoundly disturbed by the renewal of openly masculinist and misogynistic rule threatened by the emergent nationalist leaders that came to power in the multiparty elections of 1990. In those elections women were no longer protected by the 30% quota of seats guaranteed by the Communist regime, and their political representation collapsed drastically (Drakulić 1993). Pro-natalist policies introduced by the victorious demagogues were a sign of new times. The task of the patriotic woman, they made clear, was no longer to build socialism by her labour power but to regenerate the nation through mothering its sons (Bracewell 1996).

**Out on the street as Žene u Crnom**

Feminist and pacifist women in Belgrade, capital city of Slobodan Milosević’s nationalist Serbian successor-state, confusingly called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), were shocked by this unaccustomed belligerence and patriarchalism. Key among them was Staša Zajović, already active in the mixed-sex Centre for Antiwar Action. In September 1991 a group of Italian women of Donne in Nero travelled to Yugoslavia on an International Peace Caravan organized by Helsinki Citizens’ Parliament. Seeing these visitors ‘do’ Women in Black moved Staša and her friends to adopt the vigil form. They adopted the name too: Women in Black against War: Žene u Crnom protiv Rata. On 9 October 1991 they mounted a vigil in Republic Square, in the heart of Belgrade. Yet another manifestation of Women in Black was under way (ŽuC 1993).

The ŽuC vigils were every bit WiB in appearance and behaviour: silent and still, women only, dressed in black, with simple messages on banners and placards. Staša described Žene u Crnom as ‘Always disloyal’, and ‘Always disobedient’. ‘In theory and practice, with our minds and our words, we dismantle the patriarchal triad: sexism, nationalism and militarism’. In *Women for Peace* they wrote

We choose BLACK to refuse to serve as hostages of this regime that leads war; we refuse to be reduced to the social role of women as martyrs and victims... We choose SILENCE because we cannot find words to express the tragedy that war has brought or to express bitterness and repugnance against nationalist-militarist regimes, first of all this one in Serbia... Our silence is visible... an invitation to women to reflect about themselves and about the women who have been raped, tortured and killed ...who have disappeared, or whose loved ones have been killed and houses demolished (ŽuC 1994:17).

Lepa Mladjenović recalls that the women on the vigils ranged in age between eighteen and seventy-five years. Their backgrounds and life styles differed greatly. Some had been active feminists for a long time, while others were participating in feminist activism for the first time (ŽuC 1994:6). Lepa, for one, found vigilling hard at first. Looking back ten years later, she wrote,

I was very embarrassed at that time to stand in the street. I felt strange...There was actually no tradition here of women standing in the streets against something. I knew about the Israeli women, about the Italians, but it was quite different to know about them than to stand personally. After weeks and weeks of standing, this missing element was found... we created our own tradition, sense and language (ŽuC 2001:12).

The vigils were subjected to plentiful of abuse from passers-by. As elsewhere, the taunts were often sexist: ‘whores’, ‘bitches’. But they also often used presumed ethno-national identity as insult: ‘you’re not real Serbians’. Sometimes the hail of words turned into physical abuse, as when, on 29 October 1993 a Serbian paramilitary unit, the White Eagles, attacked the women. But, despite the lack of police protection, the Belgrade women kept it up. ‘Don’t speak for us – we’ll speak for ourselves,’ they were saying (ŽuC 1994:7).

 Soon the vigilling women decided to open an ‘office’ (I use inverted commas because they themselves hesitated to use that word). In a rented apartment, at No.11, Jug Bogdanova, they now had somewhere to gather, discuss tactics, produce leaflets and plan their street actions. The group were hugely productive. Ten years later, in 2001, the year they were presented by the United Nations with a UNIFEM Millennium Award, they reckoned that in that first decade of existence Žene u Crnom had published eleven annual volumes of their substantial series of books *Women for Peace*. (You will see that I draw on them substantially in this account.). They produced the books in four languages, issuing a total of 35,000 copies. They had handed out more than 50,000 leaflets about non-violence and resistance to war. They organized more than eighty ‘Women’s Peace Travelling Workshops’ in twelve towns in Serbia. Finally they reckoned they had issued more than one hundred public statements against the Serbian regime and its war policies (ŽuC 2001:346). ŽuC also established and maintained contact with women’s organizations in the newly-separated countries of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Keeping connected wasn’t easy. The postal service didn’t function and the phone lines were continually inaccessible. It was a great gain when the *Zamir* (For Peace) internet server was opened and e-mailing became a possibility. When we were together in London some years later, Lepa Mladjenović recalled the pain of the wars and the new borders they created. Soon after fighting broke out in Croatia she had gone to meet a train from Zagreb at the Belgrade rail station.

We heard that the train was strangely delayed. The report was first that it was an hour late, then several hours. Then two days. I still didn’t understand then that there was a war going on. An important moment for me. Such a sad thing - the lost train. I didn’t know, nobody could know, that that train would be five years late! In 1997, I went again to the railway station. The train was back! But now it was from the *international* ticket window I had to buy a ticket to Zagreb, not the local one. I was crying (Cockburn 2007:84).

Having the base in Jug Bogdanova also enabled fertile interaction between Žene u Crnom and other women’s initiatives that started up in Belgrade in the ensuing two or three years. These included a Women’s Studies Centre, offering courses and activities focused on women’s issues and feminist theory; a small women’s publishing house, *Feministićka 94*; and an Autonomous Women’s Centre against Sexual Violence, that supported and cared for women refugees from the wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, particularly survivors of rape. Many of the activists in these organizations were simultaneously ŽuC vigillers. Driving all of them were both determination to challenge to patriarchal violence and a sturdy refusal of any differentiation of people on the basis of ethno-national name, belonging or belief. [Footnote 6]

**A ‘Network of Women’s Solidarity against War’: annual WiB conferences**

Žene u Crnom were specially valuable to Women in Black as a growing international movement in that they established the practice of holding annual international conferences. The first was in July 1992 in the northern town of Novi Sad, and it was organized with the participation of Donne in Nero from Italy. It was from this moment that they began to use the concept of a ‘Network of Women’s Solidarity against War’, the name in which subsequently a further eight international WiB conferences were mounted in Novi Sad and other Serbian towns. I will pick out a few of their themes.

Whereas the only non-Yugoslav women to attend the first conference, in 1992, were Italian women, the second, from 3-8 August 1993, was more international. This time the Network of Women’s Solidarity against War involved women from Austria, Germany, Greece, the UK and the USA. Again in Novi Sad, it was attended by 108 women in all, and drew feminist anti-war activists from the former Yugoslav entities of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia and Macedonia. One of the important themes discussed was the matter of acknowledging one’s own ‘belonging’. Reluctant as a Serbian anti-war activist might be, due to a feeling of guilt, to ‘name’ herself as such in present circumstances, ‘that is a bad starting point... It is arrogant to negate the thousand bonds which inspire us, or oppress us. Our belonging to the female sex is not a sufficient definition of our identity, for that belonging does not unfold itself in a vacuum’ (ŽuC 1994:114). The 5th international meeting of the Network was held, again in Novi Sad, from 1-4 August 1996. This time the participants from Bosnia-Herzegovina played an important role because the Dayton Peace Agreement had brought the Bosnian war to an end just a few months before. Much of the discussion at the conference was an evaluation of that Agreement. The end of hostilities had been hugely welcome. But the women deplored the way the Dayton negotiators had carved Bosnia-Herzegovina into three ethnically distinct parts – Muslim, Serbian and Croatian. The signatories of the peace agreement had, of course, been the very same nationalistic leaders who had brought about the war. They were ‘more like accomplices than enemies’, and their Agreement had simply embodied their nationalist motivations (ŽuC 1997:31).

**Responding to war in Kosovo/a**

By the summer of 1997, when the 6th international conference was held, another Yugoslav war was pending. In the south of Serbia, adjacent on one side to Macedonia, on another to Albania, is an ‘autonomous province’ named Kosovo in Serbian, Kosova in Albanian language. The Serbian nationalist regime considered Kosovo/a to be an intrinsic part of its ‘Federal Republic of Yugoslavia’. The Albanian-speaking Muslim majority of Kosovans, however, wanted out. In the middle nineties, Milosević emphasized the Serb claim to Kosovo/a, increasingly repressing Albanian political and cultural institutions. They were countered by the Kosovan Liberation Army, supported by neighbouring Albania. At that 6th conference, a message was read out to the assembled women from Nora Ahmetaj in Priština, capital of Kosovo/a. She wrote, ‘Serbs are my friends, they are the best to me in the world, but those here are monsters’ (ŽuC 1997:123). One year later, by the time the 7th conference opened, this time on Lake Palić, near Subotica, the monsters had struck. The Kosovo/a war had begun. The conference issued an ‘open letter’ titled ‘We Refuse the War’, demanding complete disarmament of all armed parties in Kosovo/a, the involvement of women in peace negotiations, and the trial of the leaders responsible for the conflict in the International Criminal Court (ŽuC 1999:120).

 Now Žene u Crnom turned their weekly actions in Republic Square, their leaflets and their public statements, to condemnation of the ‘massive and brutal violations of individual and collective human rights of the citizens of Albanian nationality’. They called on Serb soldiers and police to refuse service in Kosovo/a. They encouraged Albanian non-violent responses. They meanwhile tried in every way possible to maintain connection with Albanian women. But it was now exceedingly difficult to reach them*,* beset as they were by Serb army, police and local militants. One Belgrade woman wrote at this time, ‘My moral and emotional imperative (no matter how pathetic it sounds) is to spend hours and hours trying to get a phone line to Priština’ (ŽuC1999:183). The 1998 volume of *Women for Peace* is dominated by the Kosovo/a conflict, and carries several articles by Albanian women, including Nora Ahmetaj and Nazlie Bala, the coordinator of ELENA Priština, a women’s human rights centre. It mentions visits, astonishingly, made to Kosovo/a at this time by some of the Belgrade women (ŽuC 1998). Addressing a conference in Struga, Macedonia, organized jointly by Žene u Crnom and a network of Kosovan women, Staša Zajović said, ‘Once again, here before you, I repeat to the women with Albanian names, “Forgive us!”. For the loss of your dearest, for endless humiliations, for indescribable pain and immeasurable suffering inflicted by the regime of the country we come from.’ (ŽuC 2007:5).

The USA and its Western allies had narrowly refrained from entering the Bosnian war, to the relief of peace activists. In the case of Kosovo/a there was no such hesitation. The NATO countries jumped into the fray against Milosević. When Western bombs started falling on Belgrade, in March 1999, ŽuC and the Autonomous Women’s Centre addressed the fear that threatened to paralyse them. They set up what they called a ‘fear counselling team’, intensively using the phone lines to keep contact with women elsewhere, helping each other overcome the panic awoken by the bombardments. They later reported that in the first twenty-five days, five telephone counsellors had 378 phone sessions with women in thirty-four towns (ŽuC 1999:222). Žene u Crnom, now banned from demonstrating, was caught, as they put it, between ‘Milosević on the ground and NATO in the air’. Many of us in Women in Black in western countries were appalled by the intervention of NATO forces. We felt driven to demonstrate against our own militaries. But Žene u Crnom refused to condemn the NATO bombing. They told the rest of us, anxiously reading their e-mails, ‘So long as we can’t condemn our regime we won’t condemn NATO. By all means do this for us! (ŽuC 1999:27). [Footnote 7]

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The above account of Žene u Crnom activism in Belgrade omits an important element in their story – their partnership with a number of male conscientious objectors, pursued by the state for their refusal to be conscripted for war. Some of these men were sheltered in the ŽuC centre in Jug Bogdanova. I pick up their story in Chapter 3, where we shall see them forging a productive partnership with the Movement for Conscientious Objection, allies of Mujeres de Negro in Spain.

**FOOTNOTES:**

1 Much of the ensuing section on Women in Black in North America derives from the booklet *Jewish Women’s Call for Peace*, see Falbel et al (1990).

2 The account that follows of Italian women’s early contacts with Israeli and Palestinian women is drawn from the unpublished paper, obtained online, titled *Visitare Luoghi Difficile 2,* authored by the three participating groups Casa delle Donne di Torino, Donne Dell’Associazione per la Pace and the Centro Delle Donne di Bologna. The short quotes are translations by me, with the help of an online translation website. The page numbers cited relate to the Italian language pdf file on my PC. For convenience I shall refer to this paper in the text as ‘VLD 1988’.

3 Following the 1988 Jerusalem Peace Camp the Italian women went on to run a project of ‘sponsorship’ of Palestinian girls. They organized this in partnership with the several Palestinian women’s committees associated with the Palestinian Union of Working Women’s Committees (PUWWC). The project involved recruiting Italians in Italy, each willing to make a regular donation of money to a particular family in support of an individual child. In addition to the monetary sponsorship, on three successive years from 1989 the project brought groups of the children, accompanied by Palestinian women leaders, to visit holiday locations in Italy. They evaluated this activity in 1992 - though with some disappointment. They found it impossible to determine whether it had had a useful effect on the participants. And it left them with a certain sadness as they belatedly recognized that they had been running a charitable program, unsuitable for the feminist and political project they really aspired to be. I mention it here only to illustrate a route *not* taken by Women in Black.

4 The ten-page paper, which I have on file as a pdf document, was authored by five women associated with the Casa delle Donne of the Italian city of Turin: Luisa Corbetta, Elisabetta Donini, Anna Garelli, Margherita Granero and Carla Ortona. In the text that follows I shall reference it as ‘Casa delle Donne Torino 1993’.

5 In the above account I draw mainly on histories written in the first half of the 1990s by Branka Magaš (1993), Susan Woodward (1995) and Laura Silber and Allan Little (1995).

6 The ŽuC office in Belgrade also proved to be a valuable refuge to a few men, conscientious objectors refusing enlistment in the military – of whom I shall write more in Chapter 3.

7 The war ended with the withdrawal of the Serbian army from Kosovo/a and the establishment of a temporary United Nations administration there. Though Kosovo/a later unilaterally declared independence, the Serbian regime continued to claim it as a province of Serbia.

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