

War Crimes and Open Wounds: The Physician Who Took on Israeli Segregation

On the occasion of her 80th birthday, Ruchama Marton, the founder of Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, talks about the atrocities she witnessed as a soldier, the enduring power of feminism, and why only outside help has a chance of ending Israel's military rule over the Palestinians.

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Featured image: Dr. Ruchama Marton in her home in Tel Aviv. (Shiraz Grinbaum/Activestills.org)

Ruchama Marton belongs to what you might call Generation 1.5 of Israel's anti-occupation activists. She was slightly too young to belong to the small and avant-garde group that established the revolutionary socialist organization Matzpen in the 1960s, but old enough to have taken classes with firebrand Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz in Jerusalem. There, while at medical school, she revolutionized the admissions process for female students, leading to the abolishing of admissions quotas. And when she discovered there as ban on women wearing trousers at the medical faculty, she revolted against that as well.

Marton founded Physicians for Human Rights-Israel during the First Intifada, bringing the term "human rights" into the Israeli political discourse. Born in Israel, where she has lived her whole life, she has been an active psychiatrist for more than 40 years. Her relationship with this place is complicated and painful, almost impossible.

Marton minces no words when it comes to the leftist and peace organizations, which she sees as a kind of "humane society," seeing little point in activism that does not directly confront the violation of human rights, the core of which are *political* rights.

She has been outraged by injustice and segregation her whole life. Between fighting chauvinism and patriarchy, and the lifelong struggle against the occupation, she refuses to be silent.

I met Marton for a talk in her Tel Aviv home in honor of her 80th birthday. I assumed she wouldn't make it easy for me. I was right.

As a psychiatrist with years of experience, I want to start with what I think is the big question. Why are we so obsessively attached to dehumanizing Arabs? Why does it seem as if the greatest desire of this place is to deny the Palestinians any kind of recognition and legitimacy? After all there is no practical purpose for that at this point, we've already won.

"What do you mean it doesn't serve a practical purpose? That's nonsense. It serves all of

the Zionist interests. Each and every one.”

Explain.

“First of all, we are colonialists. Zionism is colonialist. And the first thing a good colonialist does is dispossess. Dispossess of what? Of anything he can. Of what is important, of what serves him. Of land. Of natural resources. And, of course, of humanity. After all, it is obvious that in order to control someone else you have to take away their humanity.”

But hasn’t that project ended? It’s not as if we are in a war now and are about to conquer new territory. The War of Independence ended long ago. We won. We have already drawn borders. Why do we still need that mentality?

“What borders? There are no borders, there will be no borders, and I don’t see that there is any intention to draw them now. But beyond that, dispossession is an unending task. Those occupied people, those dispossessed people, whether they are inside the Green Line or outside of it, they do not agree. They do not give up. They don’t agree to be dispossessed of their land, of their water, of their humanity. As Hannah Arendt said: without political rights there is no human being. Political rights come before everything else. Before the right to property, movement, assembly. Those are all very nice but they are secondary. Without political rights, everything you do is charity. Without political rights, there is nothing.”



Physicians for Human Rights volunteers provide first aid on the Israel-Egypt border. (Oren Ziv/Activestills.org)

Ruchama’s family came to Israel from a rural region in Poland. Both of her parents grew up in religious homes, like most Jews at that time, certainly the ones who lived outside of the big cities. Her father was so enthralled by communist ideas, she says, that for months he secretly saved money to be able to go to Russia in the 1920s.

“The night before he was about to leave,” she says, “his father walked into his room and said: ‘I know you have been saving money and I know what for. I want to ask you to promise me one thing: do you want to go? Go. Go to America, go to Palestine. Just promise me that you will not go to Russia. They’ll kill you.’ My dad promised and kept his promise.”

Your parents settled in the Geula neighborhood of Jerusalem. You were born in 1937. Do you remember the British Mandate in Jerusalem?

“Of course. I remember the Australian soldiers patrolling the streets, and walking to the Western Wall with my grandmother. We would walk through the Old City past the Arab merchants; there was no fear. There was no great friendship either, but there was no fear.

“In Jerusalem there was a curfew every night. I remember one night when I stayed over at a girlfriend’s house until after curfew, and I went out into the street and started walking home. An Australian soldier called to me, but I didn’t understand what he was saying, since I didn’t speak English. He caught up with me and tried to understand what I was doing there, where I was going.

“He was a giant, probably six ft. tall. I don’t know how it happened, but he took my hand and walked me home. A little girl with a giant Australian soldier.

"The grandmother who used to take me with her to the Western Wall was killed by a shell in the beginning of the War of Independence. She went out to bring water in a bucket to a neighbor who had small children and was hit by a shell fired by the Arabs a shell fired by the Arabs. A little later we moved to Tel Aviv, which was a completely different world.

"Tel Aviv was much different from Jerusalem. It had a feeling of strangeness and wildness. We lived in an area on the outskirts of town; there were hardly any houses there. It was surrounded by Arab orchards, gardens, and fields of sugarcane growing toward the Yarkon River. It was another world."

Did you have any friends in Tel Aviv? It must not have been easy.

"I didn't know anybody here, of course. And in that generation parents and children hardly spoke to one another. But in the house across from us, the only house close by, there was an Arab family. They had an orchard, a garden, and a small herd of sheep and goats.

"They had two children, Zeidin, who was about a year younger than me, and Fatima, who was a bit older than me. They were my best friends. We used to play together, spend our days together in the orchards and in nature. I loved them.

"At the end of 1947 soldiers came and evicted the family. I remember standing and watching that scene unfold. They loaded what little belongings they had and their old grandmother on a donkey and set off for the east. Their house still exists to this day — it was turned into a synagogue."

In the 1956 Sinai War you also saw things that left a deep mark on you.

"The murder of prisoners by the soldiers in my unit, Givati."

What happened there?

"In the days following the Israeli invasion of the Sinai Peninsula, Egyptian soldiers continued to surrender. They would come out of the sand dunes, sometimes barefoot, black from the desert sun, dirt, and sweat, with their hands up.

"Our soldiers shot them. Dozens of them, maybe more. That's just what I saw. They would come down from the dunes and the soldiers lifted their guns and killed them."

And what did they do with them? Did they just leave them on the sand?

"Yes. It left me sick. Physically sick. I vomited and was in a terrible state. I went to my commander and asked for a leave. I told him it was because of what happened. Needless to say, he completely 'did not know' what I was talking about. But he approved my leave and I hitchhiked home.

"I wanted to talk about what happened. I wanted to publish it, but nobody agreed. They told me to leave it alone. I had friends who worked at newspapers, and I thought, naïvely, that they might want to publish it. Nobody agreed to touch it. When I was 19 I already knew that what they told me about Zionism and the army was a pile of lies."

An Internet search about the killing of prisoners during the Sinai War led to several links, including an interview with Brig. Gen. Ariele Eliaz, who admitted that he and his soldiers

murdered Egyptian prisoners during that war. I can only assume that the murders that took place were far more common and serious than the ones found in the “inquiry” ordered by Shimon Peres in 1995.

After the army you went to medical school. At the time there were quotas for women.

“Yes. There was a quota and they didn’t want a lot of women to become doctors. So they limited them to a 10 percent quota. I waged a struggle against that along with other students and faculty members, leading to the cancellation of the quota. Since then women are admitted to medical school in Israel based on their qualifications, just like men.”

After all of your years working with human psychology and the conflict, do you see any change? If I understand you correctly, despite the tremendous propaganda skills Israel has developed, despite the ongoing brainwashing, from what you’re saying it seems that it was the same in the 1950s.

“First of all, Zionism and what a human being *is* are two things that don’t intersect. But there has been no essential change here. It’s more of the same. It’s true that the Zionist propaganda machine would make the Soviets proud, but the essence of the beliefs about basic things, about the treatment of the Arabs and their place — those beliefs have not changed.”

A mental health revolutionary

At 80, Marton is still an active psychiatrist. In her many years in the profession, she has advocated and campaigned to take mental health care out of the psychiatric hospitals and bring it into the community.

I was very surprised that there was someone in Israel talking about psychiatric care as part of the community. It actually means normalizing mental health.

“Why shouldn’t there be a psychiatric clinic inside the neighborhood health clinic? There should be an optometrist, an ENT, and a psychiatrist. In exactly the same place, at the same level, in the same corridor, with the same concept.”

You believed in this very early in your career, and you took concrete steps to make it happen.

“I was the first person in Israel who brought a proposal to the medical establishment – I went all the way to Shimon Peres and others, I told them that mental health clinics do not need to be in psychiatric hospitals. It’s a disaster, no less. People have that terrible stigma that deters them from entering a psychiatric hospital.

“There was one director, Davidson (Prof. Shamai Davidson, Director of the Shalvata Hospital from 1973-1986. He moved to Israel from Dublin in 1955 – A.M.), he really was a saint; he really understood and supported the idea of community-based psychiatric care. The concept of community is something he brought with him from the diaspora. He listened to me with an open heart and was the one who carried out that revolution and led to the opening of a psychiatric treatment clinic at a clinic in Morasha, and then in Ramat Hasharon, and from there it just spread.

To this day the project has not been completed. But we did break that initial wall.

Do you know how many people don't ask for help because the clinic is located inside a psychiatric hospital? And then what happens? They break down and get hospitalized. Great! We got what we wanted."

I'm listening to what you're saying and thinking: there is something justified about people's fear of the psychiatric system. Something about the system's perception of itself and of the patient — it's sick.

"That's very true. That was what I was fighting for. But today my fighting days are behind me. After 30 or 40 years, I've had enough. Maybe I didn't succeed in everything, but I did in some things. I'm very proud of it."

Do you think about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or about the Zionist story, in psychological terms? The story of murdering prisoners, for example, the likes of which I heard from people close to me, fills me with deep shame.

"I am fascinated by the subject of shame. It is the emotion I have worked with most for years. I believe that without shame there is no hope for the world — there is no human being. Without shame a person can do anything. One of the things that has happened to us is that we have lost all shame. The soldiers who shot the prisoners were not ashamed. That is why they did what they did."

Where else do you see examples of such shamelessness?



Marton seen with Dr. Eyad al-Sarraj, founder of the Gaza Mental Health Foundation in the early days of Physicians for Human Rights. (Physicians for Human Rights)

"In my profession. Palestinians who were involved in terrorism, or at least accused of it, are sent to psychiatric evaluation. You might be surprised to hear this, but there are simply no Palestinians with mental illnesses — at least not the kinds that prevent them from being tried by Israel. Palestinians do not have the right to be crazy."

Israeli psychiatrists examine Palestinian defendants and know that they suffer from various psychiatric conditions, yet they still declare them competent to stand trial?

"Of course they know. And how do I know that they know? Because after they are tried and sent to prison, they receive medication for schizophrenia. And these are not errors of ignorance. I'm talking about good doctors. Yet still they give ridiculous and erroneous diagnoses.

"I went there and saw for myself. I spoke to prisoners. I wrote about it in the newspaper at the time. I was disciplined by the Israel Medical Association for naming doctors who were involved in such diagnoses. They intended to sue me but they decided to let it go so as not to expose the public to all of the dirty tricks that go on behind closed doors. I was then forced to write a letter of apology. I wrote the letter, which included two lines of apology followed by a full account of the things I knew, including the mistaken diagnoses and what was behind them. That letter has not been published to this day."

That was not the end of Marton's and Physicians for Human Rights-Israel's trouble with the Israeli Medical Association and the Israeli establishment. In 2009 the Association announced it was cutting ties with PHRI, after the organization accused Israeli doctors of taking part in torture. Furthermore, the Tax Authority has refused to renew the organization's status as a public institution for tax purposes, ever since it published a statement according to which the occupation is a violation of human rights — including the right to health. According to the Tax Authority, such statements are deemed "political."

Medicine is a political issue

How did Physicians for Human Rights-Israel begin?

"When I wanted to do something practical, something political, I used that which was most available to me: medicine. I contacted a Palestinian medical organization. Palestinian volunteers used to go out to treat people in the field, and I joined them.



Marton rides along with and volunteers on the way a Physicians for Human Rights trip to the West Bank.
(Physicians for Human Rights)

"After a while I began organizing volunteers from Israel. I had to beg people to go out with me on Saturday mornings. At first I managed to get two people, which felt like a huge achievement. Now around 30 volunteers go out [to the West Bank] with the mobile clinic.

"I made the organization's rules: it is always us and the Palestinians together. It is never a delegation of white colonialists going out to rescue the natives. We work together in full agreement with our Palestinian partners; they say where they need us, and in the absolute majority of cases that is where we go."

And where do you work? It's not as if they have organized clinics.

"Clinics? There are hardly any clinics in those villages, and the ones that exist are small and unsuitable for big teams like ours. We use schools and offices of local councils. And you don't need to make some big announcement — word gets around in the village and in the nearby villages. First thing on Saturday morning, there are already too many people."

What treatments do you provide?

"Anything that one can do in the field, including relatively simple surgeries. We bring donated medications with us, and write prescriptions for medications we don't have. When there is a need for complicated exams we refer to different hospitals in the Palestinian Authority and Israel. That also involved many years of struggle."

The State of Israel never considered itself responsible for the health of those it occupied.

"Right. But until Oslo, or until the First Intifada, there were Palestinian hospitals in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which became Israeli government hospitals after 1967. There was a very limited medical budget, nothing like in a normal country. But, for example, there was a vaccination budget. Paradoxically, in the refugee camps, the situation was much better, since they were under the responsibility of UNRWA.

When the First Intifada broke out, one of the decisions made by then-Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin was to stop the budget for Palestinian medical services. When I heard about this I flew to London and showed up at the offices of the BBC. I told them about the situation in the occupied territories, and they sent a team to do a brief item about that decision and its outcome, namely people dying in their homes because of the lack of medical care. The uproar convinced Rabin to restore at least part of the budget.”

Go home, get dressed

A few days ago there was a [photo in the newspaper](#) of the head of the Mossad visiting the home of the U.S. national security advisor. All the people in the photo were men. I’m really happy to say that such a photo looks strange to me today.

“That brings me back again to the subject of segregation. That is how people are taught to think about themselves. That separation, the fact that there is a women’s gallery [in synagogue], and now they want separation in the army and the universities too. Segregation is the root of all evil.

“My first wars were not over the Palestinian issue. They were feminist, even though I didn’t call it that at the time.”

You are a proud woman.

“Not enough. I mean I’m too proud to ask for credit, and sometimes I’m full of resentment that I don’t get it. For example, I was the first one to introduce the concept of “human rights” into the Israeli discourse. Before that there were “civil rights,” but human rights as a political concept is my work.”

Yet you still don’t feel comfortable demanding recognition.

“That’s right. Maybe it’s the result of my feminine education. Not feminist, *feminine*. The kind that teaches women not to stand out. To be nice, smile, not to get angry. To never start a sentence with the word ‘I.’ That’s how women are raised.”

You are outraged by chauvinism. It’s not that different from your outrage at the occupation.

“My whole life I had to contend with stigmas and separate rules for women. With the fact that women were not allowed to wear pants in medical school in the Jerusalem cold. When I showed up with pants one female lecturer said to me: “Young lady, go home, get dressed properly and come back.” I went home and I didn’t come back. I raised hell, and in the end I won.”

Criticism of all sides

You are very critical of the Israeli Left and the way it confronts the occupation.

“There is no Israeli Left. What we need to do is start Israel’s human rights organizations from scratch so that they are willing to fight to end apartheid. Apartheid that distinguishes between those who have everything and those who have nothing. Those who are allowed everything and those who are forbidden everything. If they are unwilling to undertake that fight, what are they fighting for? For their own self image.

"You can't fight colonialism, occupation, apartheid — call it what you want — by playing in the government's court, according to the government's agenda. You must breach those boundaries."

The Labor Party actually maintained the occupation for 10 whole years and didn't do anything about it.

"Don't say Mapai didn't do anything. They were the ones who established the settlements. Begin was the only righteous leader we have had. I mean it. Under his rule torture was completely forbidden. When the head of the Shin Bet came to him and asked 'Sir, not even a slap?' He said: 'No. Not even a slap.'

"Begin forbade demolishing houses, he forbade expulsion. He was the only righteous man in Sodom. There was not a single righteous man either before him or after him."

I always thought, and still think, that the normal moderate Revisionist Right is the camp with the best chances of treating the Arabs humanely.

"I don't want humane treatment of the Arabs. I want political rights. After that you can be humane or whatever you want. Without political you continue to be a colonialist, an occupier, an apartheidist.

"A human rights organization that is not willing to fight for that is howling at the moon. It is meaningless."

In a sense you are also talking about yourself. This is also a personal reckoning.

"That's right. I'm talking to you after 30 or maybe 50 years of fighting the occupation. We need outside help. And I'm talking mainly about one thing: BDS."

Working in Israel for that cause is not easy.

She laughs. "It's a matter for traitors, and today's traitors are tomorrow's heroes. Anyone who is not willing to pay that price does not know how to fight. If you don't pay a price you are fighting only for your own beautiful image. As long as the occupation continues, as long as apartheid continues, it doesn't matter if you are a little more or less beautiful."



Physician for Human Rights volunteers hand out medication from a mobile clinic in the West Bank.
(Oren Ziv/Activestills.org)

She stops to think for a moment.

"We have to fight the idea of segregation, because it separates between me and the political, between the Arab and his land, between the Arab and his human dignity. Segregation is the wound. It is the axis around which things revolve."

Even though Jews brought the idea of segregation here with them. After all, there are all kinds of segregation among the Jews themselves, along ethnic, religious, and political lines.

"There surely is segregation here on all levels. After all, we are divided here into first-class and second-class Jews, and beneath them are Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the

Palestinians in the West Bank are even lower. At the very bottom of the ladder are the asylum seekers and the refugees (Physicians for Human Rights holds an “[Open Clinic](#)” that provides medical care to refugees and asylum seekers, A.M.).

“Segregation exists within our society as a central political principal. If we cancel segregation, then what? It will be a political disaster for the regime — not just for the Right.

“When I think about what my organization has done — about the trips to Gaza, about handing out medicine out of solidarity, about managing to shatter segregation — that has our biggest achievement.”

Alon Mizrahi is a writer and a blogger at Local Call, where this article was first published in Hebrew. Read it [here](#). Translated from the original Hebrew by Shoshana London Sappir.

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