

Something Was Sure Rotten in Denmark—the 1980 UN Women's Conference

It Condemned Israel, Women Were Quite Beside the Point

By Phyllis Chesler

I wrote this piece for [Lilith Magazine](#) in 1980. Founding editor Aviva Cantor renamed me “Regina Schreiber” (Queen Writer) because, at the time I wrote the piece (and before it was published in 1981), I was still negotiating with Israel's Foreign Ministry to host a genuine woman-focused conference in Jerusalem, one that would have included Arab and Muslim women from around the world. That plan became impossible once the long overdue annexation of East Jerusalem took place. But the Israelis had been willing to have such a gathering.



A view of the dais during the closing meeting of the Conference; Image from the UN website

Copenhagen: One Year Later

by "Regina Schreiber"

June 22, 1981

On the Nature of the Conference:

Copenhagen was not a conference about or for women. It was really a conference about the PLO and their rights. The countries were voting to be able to condemn Zionism and equate it with apartheid. Countries that voted for the World Plan of Action had no serious intention or ability to implement it.

Women were *used* in Copenhagen for male political purpose. Women were the *victims* of this non-conference. There were officially eight thousand women present; there were also six thousand women there unofficially. The largest room held six

hundred. And *only* in that room was there translation into three different languages, and then only twice a day, and they called it "unofficial."

There was no child care.

Copenhagen was a UN conference that was essentially very angry, one more time, at America and at the Western world. Israel was the whipping-girl, the convenient scapegoat. Third world countries didn't attack America directly, but instead attacked Israel. At the official conference, there were no speeches against American capitalism or American imperialism, only against "Zionist capitalism" and "Zionist imperialism."

This was fine for America. This was also fine for the Third World countries—all of whom were represented by the sons and daughters of the ruling elites of those countries. These are not people who walk five miles to get water each day, or who live in poverty, or have running sores, and yet they spoke as if this is their daily fate— and the only reason that poverty, filth and war exist, is because Israel exists.

Delegates from country after country gave lip-service to statements such as, "We have drought and famine and we have social injustice and inequality in our country, and it is because of apartheid and *because of Zionism*, and if we could get rid of Zionism and the apartheid, then the women in our country would be able to get water and education and food..."

Nobody looked at a particular nation-state to question its right to survive, no matter how unjust the country is to the women in its own country or to any other country in the world. They did that consistently *only* with Israel. No one officially said that the caste system in India had to be attacked by the UN because it was injuring women of a low caste. What they *did* say is that the Palestinian situation has to be attacked and changed because it was injuring Palestinian women.

It was a conference to flex the muscles of the Third World against the might of the so-called First World as the sun begins to set slowly but surely on our empire. Women were an aside, feminist viewpoints were an aside. Jews were not an aside, though. Jews have always been handy in world history to be summoned to center stage and wiped out.

The world was testing the climate to see how much scapegoating will be tolerated. In Copenhagen, Israel officially became the Jew of the world, just as women everywhere, including in Israel, are the Jews of each nation-state.

Specific Instances of Anti-Semitism:

At a UN conference held before Copenhagen, a UN person said to Esther Broner: "Norway is wonderful, but the Germans take it over in the summer, and I hate the Germans, But they did one thing right— they killed the Jews!" Seeing Esther turn green, she paused and put her arm on Esther's and said, "I'm sorry, have I offended you? Are you German?"

There was a woman in Oslo, a high-level UN official from Asia, who got drunk and yelled, there and later in Copenhagen, "Kill the Zionist bitches! Kill the Zionist bitches!"

In Copenhagen, there would be people at many, many panels yelling—making no eye contact—yelling, "Jews must die! Israel must die! Israel kills babies, tortures women, kills men. Israel must die!" over and over again.

There was a band ranging from 30 to 50 people who would go to the unofficial conference and then roam through the halls looking for panels or workshops to disrupt, or where there might be Jews, or where there might be Israelis or where there might be Zionists. There was one panel on woman refugees. The moderator was a Dutch woman. The N.G.O. forum, as an umbrella group, would not allow a Jewish refugee to speak on the panel. They had women from Chile, and from South Africa a Black woman, women from the Polisario in the Sahara, from Ramallah,

from Indochina. They also had a woman who was working with refugees in Scandinavia.

The disruptions had been so horrendous that there was a new policy in this session—nobody can speak at the mike unless you put your name in first on a small piece of paper and get called on at random. You can speak for two minutes, and then the mike goes dead.

The Jewish women, who by this time see ourselves as Jewish women, have a strategy: whoever of us gets called on, will turn the microphone over to a Jewish refugee from Iraq whose husband was executed and who escaped from the land hostile to her and her children. Many of the Jewish women sat there frightened, not at all conversant with disruptive tactics or yelling and screaming. There were sitting there, clutched, bunched up together, tense, tearful, frightened, thinking, "The accusations that they have been making against us—what if they're true, then what do we do? And what if they're not but the whole world thinks they're true, then what do we do?"

The audience was 600 strong. At least half of the audience was there because the panel title says "women refugees," and everyone knows that means the Palestinian issue again. There were a few people who really came to hear the panel.

The first woman who spoke was from Chile; she talked about the special problems that women in exile have; she talked about wife-beating, about the powerlessness and frustration and the rage of the men—that they can't get jobs, they can't go home; their revolution failed, and they leave the women, or they can't support the children, or they beat the women. She wondered whether this then was the extra price that women in exile pay. She was not a feminist, but she was trying to address the issue of women refugees.

The next woman talked about the rape and the murder of the boat people that she had witnessed with her own eyes and

escaped. She begged us to help her and her people. She said, "The men rape us and throw us out of the boats, and they keep the food to themselves." She said, "Help me."

The third woman who spoke was from South Africa. She wasn't eloquent, but she tried to talk about the lack of education, the separation of families under apartheid, its effect on women who want to be close to their families, the loss of their children—she tried to talk about women refugees. The woman from the Polisario talked about what it means to be a mother under siege: no education, no food, no nutrition, no medicine; fear of failure as a mother because she can't provide these things; a constant fear of death. She didn't talk as a feminist, but she talked as a woman.

Then the woman from Ramallah, who was identified as a Palestinian refugee, read a speech clearly written for her. It was too mild for her. It had nothing to do with women. She got applause! She said nothing, she wept tears, and she got applause. Then the meeting was opened to the audience. The first five speakers, called randomly and impartially by the moderator, acted as if the panelists did not exist and as if the panel had not taken place. All five of them, one after the other, made passionate pro-PLO/anti-Israel speeches.... It was rigged, because how else could that happen? Or, if it wasn't rigged, then 90 percent of the people there were paid employees of the PLO or fellow-travellers who got up of their own free will, for no cash, and spit on the suffering of these other women!

A woman from Pakistan got up to speak for the women from Afghanistan, who are now living in camps in her country because of the Soviet invasion. All hell breaks loose. An entire Soviet-trained contingent begins yelling at her. It's the same group that's yelling the anti-Zionist stuff. They would not let her talk, would not let her be heard.

At that moment, a Jewish feminist went up to the moderator and

said, "You'd better call on a Jew, or I'll break your arm." She ruffled through her papers, and did call on Yael Etzman, who turned over the place to Simcha Choresch.

Simcha is the woman from Iraq. She talked for two minutes about what it was like to be a Jew living under Arab Islamic and Arab Christian rule, hated and tortured. She, of course, was talking as many Sephardim in Israel talk about Arabs they've lived among and don't want to go back to, and they don't see them as kin but rather as enemies.

As she was speaking, the woman who was the head of the unofficial PLO delegation, who also was from Iraq, began to advance on her menacingly with another woman. One Jewish feminist put her body between the two of them. Simcha was interrupted in the middle of her two-minute speech. Pandemonium broke loose. For five minutes straight the chant was, "Cuba si, yanqui no! PLO, PLO!" For five minutes straight, very loud.

At another panel, one woman said, "The only good Jew is a dead Jew." She also said the Zionism is a disease that has to be "killed at the cellular level."

There was a sculptor from Africa, a spicy, saucy, grand, creative person. When a Jewish feminist met her on the street at the end of the conference, she said, "Where do you go, my sister?" The Jewish woman, said, "I'm going to Israel." Her face crumpled into disgust. She pulled her massive self together and said, "Salaam aleikem," and walked away.

There were many moments like that in Copenhagen.

On the Reaction of the Jewish Women at Copenhagen:

The Jewish women in Copenhagen experienced Copenhagen as a psychological pogrom. When talking about Copenhagen six months afterwards they would cry, stop speaking, and fear that their words would not do justice to what had happened to them there.

The women were from various nongovernmental organizations—The National Council of Jewish Women, Hadassah, American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress. They were very respectful of feminism, and some of them were very passionate feminists. They were very angry at a Jewish patriarchal structure that did not support their own feminist goals.

The majority of Jewish women from organizations came on their own steam with little support or advance information, knowledge or expertise—and on their own money! Jewish women from the Western world were relatively unprepared, because their male-dominated organizations were under-funded or their female-only organizations didn't give them enough support.

Here is a world of women, with a world of issues, and there's only one issue that creates tension, solidarity, and terror in the heart of the Jew who's conscious...

The Jewish women there from around the world, including the Israeli women, could not believe that there would be so loud a chorus of hatred against Israel and against Jews that would not be interrupted! They could not believe they could not get a fair hearing. They could not believe that other women would not treat them as women first and as nationals second. They were not prepared for the enormity of the hostility and indifference.

The Jewish women who came as Jews, and many who came as feminists, grew close together, and were in a state of shell-shock.

While women from other cultures know how to elbow and scream and yell and carry on and were very well trained by the men who sent them, the Jewish women were passive, and easily silenced; somewhat guilty and wanting to be on the side of right and somewhat paralyzed. I think the stereotype of the Jewish ghetto woman with the fish in the barrel and the kids at her knees has given way now because of some terrible

castration that has been done to Jewish women who are more privileged economically, who are volunteers, who are not feminists yet, and who cannot speak up in their own voices on their own behalf or on behalf of Israel, or on behalf of the Jewish people. There was a terrible paralysis, of fear, shame and disbelief. It's the pattern of evil occurring and good people not rising up immediately to do battle with it. They'd rather be the victim of evil than risk become evil themselves if they fight. In other words, good girls don't fight, and good feminists *don't fight with women. So even if a woman is being anti-Semitic or being racist, you turn the other cheek, you turn Christian!*

At the panel where five Israeli women came to speak unofficially, the same woman who was the leader of this PLO pack was there. When one Jewish feminist was recognized and stood up to say something, she kept interrupting and making her speech. The feminist started to interrupt her. All around there were women, and Jewish women, saying "Tsk! Don't be an animal like her! Let her talk, let her talk! Let her get it out of her system, and then you'll talk." They had a very hard time dealing with the one Jewish feminist's being assertive back, saying, "You be quiet! You wait! You shut up!"

It was almost as if, when the Big Lie was told by a small woman, the somewhat guilty, frightened, intimidated good German Jews (from America) sitting there said, "The Brown Shirt is an animal. Let them talk; we don't have to listen to them. We're civilized! We're dignified! We have credit cards! We don't have to shut them up, we don't have to take them on—we're better than they are! Also, as Jews and as women, we have to be ladylike, and remain on pedestals, and turn the other cheek. We can afford to be better and nicer."

On the Reaction of Israeli Women:

Some of the Israeli women were feminists or respectful of feminism or willing to work together with women.

The Israeli delegation was relatively unprepared because the Israeli government was relatively unprepared; Israel had so many other problems that this one conference was not given a high enough priority to strategize about. They should have taken effective action—some large press-worthy gesture of moral outrage, of anger and of fear.

Their large grandstand press conference was with Simcha Choresch, to show that there are now Jewish refugees and always have been, and half of them have always been women. And Shulamit Aloni caught some press attention when she wanted to sit down with Leila Khaled, and Khaled said, "Only with a gun will I talk to you."

Of course, Israeli politicians say that the lobbying they did in Copenhagen was far more effective than it was in Mexico City, and things could have been worse. When career diplomats go home, they have to make themselves look good, not bad. Even when people go home after pogroms, they try either to forget or to make themselves look better than they were at the time. Most Jewish women were quite undone. The Israeli delegation decided that it would have—unofficially—a panel. And so there was an unofficial panel created that had Israeli women. Minna Ben-Zvi chaired it. Tamar Eshel was on it with Shulamit Aloni, Yael Etzman, Nitza Libai. The place was packed with paid, PLO- and Soviet-trained people from Africa, South America, Europe and the Middle East, who stood up every minute to interrupt and disrupt, to accuse, and to silence, and to drown out any illusion that Israeli women could dare show their faces or try to speak.

One of the issues that could have been very explosive at this conference—which Israel, for example, could have used—was the issue of the genital mutilation of women in Islamic countries and in places in Africa. Many of the African women who are involved in trying to crusade on that issue know they had to keep quiet, and speak about it only very carefully. And *they* often attacked Israel loudly.

A report on the genital mutilation of women was severely attacked by a group of African women in Copenhagen, who presented a petition that said, "for medical reasons" the genital mutilation should be restricted to partial clitorectomies and they should be done in hospitals, because otherwise the women can't get pregnant, or die."

The issue of genital mutilation is a very clear and terrifying and feminist issue that feminists from the Western world didn't go after, for fear of offending national sensibility and/or endangering the women under the regimes. This "sensitivity" did not apply to Jews and Israelis.

Feminist said things like "Well, you know, you have to truly respect the national custom, you have to go very slowly, these women are in a tight spot."

They did not offer the same measure of understanding or generosity to Israeli women. Israeli women were often told, "What are they staying with these men for? Why don't they just leave those Israeli men? I mean, they're just patriarchs. They killed the Mother-Goddess, and/or they're occupying East Jerusalem, and/or they're allegedly putting the Palestinians in camps. So if you're really good women why don't you just have nothing whatsoever to do with these men!"

On the Response of Non-Jewish American Women:

Members of the American delegation didn't give a damn, basically. These were Carter appointees, some at the last minute. Sara Weddington, the head of the delegation, held all the cards close to her chest. Her career was on the line.

In the American delegation, the feminists were powerless, the career diplomats weren't feminists, and then there was the component that was completely unsophisticated that was sent to a women's conference because they were women. (You also had this in the Israeli delegation.)

The American delegation had a kind of a rainbow representation going on. Some of the delegates were feminists, and some of them were Jews, and some of them tried very hard to get the World Plan of Action (see page 33) passed and to disentangle it from the "Zionism is Racism" statement.

Some were Black women who wanted very much to pass the World Plan of Action. They viewed the Jewish women on the delegation and Jewish women at the conference who were lobbying against it as their enemies, as people who did not care about racism or about Black women as women, who were more privileged than Black women who are on welfare (and shouldn't be privileged because you're Jews, you shouldn't have money if you're Jewish, you should be poor or dead!). There was bitterness, animosity and tragic feelings.

American women – feminists—in Copenhagen understood that Third World women had to have divided loyalties, and they had to romanticize respect for the divided loyalties of women from Africa who have to wait until they have national liberation. But when a Jewish feminist said, "Wait a minute! We too, living in the belly of the beast, as Jews, we have divided loyalties!" they said, "Well you shouldn't! And you better not, and if you do, we're not going to talk to you, and we're not going to be your friends, and we're not going to let you speak publicly, and we will disown you! We will not consider you part of us; we will say you are not feminists!"

In Copenhagen, there were Iranian women, swathed like mummies, given a form of grudging respect and sense of sisterhood by American feminists that was withheld *absolutely* from American Jewish women. The anger of Black women was being catered to by white women who are racist. They would not cater to the anger of Jewish women.

Feminists in America again romanticized Cuban nationalism and American Black African dress, but withheld from Jews even a glimmer or glint of the right to have pride in the existence

of a Jewish nation-state. That is something we are supposed to be ashamed of, apologize for, offer at any moment and in any way to give back.

Once get a nation-state, and you're not supposed to—you're supposed to have been dead long ago—then that nation-state is an eyesore, it is a mote in the eye of the world, and they keep trying to pluck it out. Jews are supposed to die, not live; be scattered, not ingathered; be ashamed, not proud; be defeated, not victorious! Any time Israel is victorious in any sense of the word, it is hated doubly.

The other feminists who were really there as feminists were naive and confused. Some of them were anti-Semitic, and some of them were Jewish but don't want to be Jewish. Some of them were truly not involved in this, and didn't think about it or didn't care about it. The reason is that Jewish life is cheaper, and nobody wants to be on the side of Zionism right now, certainly not if you're an endangered species as a feminist or as a woman. Do anything against the UN—or anything that is truly for women in this context—and you'll be accused of being Zionist and anti-PL0. They would lose oil money, or they would lose the American white Christian Right, which is notoriously anti-Semitic. Nobody wanted to take that chance, that jump, that fall, that risk.

Jewish feminists at Copenhagen and upon our return were given to understand that what we had to say either wasn't true, or is exaggerated, or is not worth hearing, or is not feminist, or is the product of paranoia and that we somehow imagined we were raped in our Maidenform bras. We imagined it, we dreamed it, and now we're trying to get other people into trouble by reporting our rape. They said that it wasn't true because they didn't happen to be there and didn't see it and didn't believe! Or they said it was not important; or they said that it wasn't a priority.

In Copenhagen, I saw my grandmother's wig askew and her legs

in the air and Cossacks riding off. And nobody noticed and nobody cared.

Below, you'll find comments from other people about this conference.

E. M. BRONER, *participant in the UNITAR conference on "Creative Women in Changing Societies" (Oslo, Norway) and in the Open Forum of the UN (Copenhagen).*

At these conferences I was the illegitimate daughter, I as Jewish daughter. I was de-legitimized as one of the member nations of the earth. Again, as in the Middle Ages, I was accused of poisoning the wells and causing the Bubonic Plague, only this time I poisoned access to oil wells and caused economic hardship, by my very insistence on existing.

The sorrow is that women—our sisters—made me a step-sister. Women were fed and spewed forth, and believed, male myths. Women of the world, articulate, educated, clever women of every nation, spoke with a single male voice.

At one large forum, I gained access to the mike—that was largely denied to Jewish/Israeli women—and accused the women congregated there of not being women: *"No one in this room has breasts or a womb."* I said. *"You speak" through fake beards and mustaches.* But metaphor was not understood, and reality was misconstrued.

The reality is that in times of economic strife nations and peoples separate. We women acted as separate nations, not as ourselves, not out of our shared experiences. If Israel were not in our midst, the nations seemed to say, then there would be no wife-battering, no child abuse, no sexual slave trade, no illiteracy, no malnutrition, no refugees. And no war.

If it were so simple, I would uproot myself from my own self.

We could not comprehend the complex situation. Women in the

States cannot comprehend the fairly simple situation of pro-choice vs. forced pregnancies—so how can women comprehend world power plays? We—or they—became megaphones of monarchies, oligarchies, theocracies.

There was no ally for the Israeli woman, no one the Jewish woman from any land could address herself to. We did not speak of the suffering of the Israeli woman under theocratically repressive laws. We did not join the Moslem and Israeli women in proclamations against the laws which govern family life in both cultural contexts.

That is what I learned this decade of the woman. And what I fear is that I will not be present, as nation, as Jew, at the end of the decade.

FROM STATEMENTS LIKE THE ONE BELOW, JEWISH WOMEN PREPARING FOR COPENHAGEN EXPECTED WIDE-RANGING SUPPORT AT THE CONFERENCE.

NEW YORK, July 24, 1980 JTA

A group of internationally eminent women, including several political figures, artists, authors and actresses have signed a statement appealing to the participants at the international women's conference in Copenhagen to end politization of the conference and to "preserve its universal character."

Among those who signed the statement are Simone de Beauvoir, Louise Nevelson, Madeleine Renaud, Beverly Sills and Bella Abzug. Other women, from the United States, include Colleen Dewhurst, Betty Friedan, Shelley Winters, Ann Jackson, Ann Meara, Jacqueline Grennan Wexler, Bess Meyerson, Eugenie Anderson and Reps. Beverly Byron (D.Md.), Marjorie Holt (R.Md.) and Margaret Heckler (R. Mass.). The appeal "to all participants, " stated:

"This conference provides us with the opportunity to make known our views on questions which preoccupy women: social life, equality, education, health and employment. We know that actions are to use this conference for partisan ends thus

diverting it from its initial aims. Politicizations have no place in this encounter. It is to be hoped that this conference, which rallies women from all countries, preserves its universal character.”

The statement was initiated in France by a group of women aware that certain agenda items might overshadow the original intent of the conference and turn the event into an explosive political forum. Among the countries represented in the list of signatories are Australia, Austria, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Denmark, Federal Republic of Germany, Ecuador, Finland, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Panama, Portugal, Uruguay, U.S. and Venezuela.

The National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN) also issued an appeal “to women of all faiths to join hands as sisters in an effort to make the International Women’s Conference in Copenhagen what it is supposed to be—an opportunity for women to dialogue about the women’s agenda.” The appeal, signed by Sister Margaret Traxler and Sister Ann Gillen, members of the Coalition’s executive board and delegates to the conference, added, in part:

“NCAN deplores the efforts of the PLO to politicize this women’s conference in Copenhagen, 1980, as they did in the International Women’s Conference in Mexico City in 1975.

“NCAN denounces the PLO terrorists, who presume to speak for the largely silent Palestinian people. The PLO do not even dialogue with all their brothers—to say nothing of their sisters... So far, the PLO has not shown any signs of joining the human family, as they are still pledged to ‘liquidate’ the State of Israel...

“Palestinian women are hostages to the perverse nationalistic hatred of the PLO, who demonstrate by their plans for Copenhagen that they dominate their own sisters, using them as pawns in the game of politics, even as they keep them in the

bondage of Arab male supremacy. Finally NCAN urges Palestinian women to share the concerns of all women and to join in efforts to build peace for their people.... ”

THE HOPED FOR SUPPORT NEVER MATERIALIZED. MANY OF THE WOMEN WHO WENT TO COPENHAGEN AS REPRESENTATIVES OF JEWISH WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS EXPRESS THE SAME SHOCK OF DISBELIEF IN THE AFTERMATH OF COPENHAGEN AS THE JEWISH FEMINIST WHOSE ACCOUNT APPEARS HERE. SOME SAMPLES:

COPENHAGEN, July 31, 1980 (JTA) – The world conference of the United Nations Decade for Women ended here today with an overwhelming 94-4 vote for a 186-point “plan of action” which included a paragraph that listed Zionism as one of the world’s main evils, along with colonialism and apartheid. The paragraph, which in effect declared Zionism to be racist and colonialist, was submitted by Cuba when the conference opened as an amendment to the “plan of action.”

The United States, Canada, Israel and Australia voted against the document because of the anti-Zionist statement. Sarah Weddington, head of the U.S. delegation, declared after the vote that “the conference was subverted from focusing on women’s real issues by the political polemics of the Middle East crisis.” There were 22 abstentions, mostly by Western European countries.

The final document also contained the proviso that all UN funds for Palestinian women refugees be channeled through the Palestine Liberation Organization, a singular victory for the PLO. The anti-Israel mood of the gathering was further manifested by its extension of official recognition to the PLO delegation, headed by airline hijacker Leila Khaled. The PLO previously had only observer status.

NEW YORK, Aug. 5, 1980 (JTA) – Frieda Leemon, national president of Pioneer Women, said she “felt threatened and isolated” as a Jewish participant at Copenhagen.

Third World, Communist and PLO representatives at the conference expressed fierce anti-Jewish sentiment. There was "a very well-organized coalition of anti-white, anti-American and anti-Israel" representatives, and she said the frequent walk-outs and anti-Jewish public statements may have been organized in advance.

Many Jews in the Forum wanted to talk with Arab women, only to be told by a PLO representative: "To you we will talk with weapons; to the rest of the world we'll talk with words."

NEW YORK, Aug. 6, 1980 (JTA) – Hadassah president Bernice Tannenbaum returned from Copenhagen where she was "appalled by the bias of those in the chair, the secretariat, the United Nations special agencies, and by the lack of ordinary proper procedures."

"The PLO was there in full force, they busted up whatever meeting they were not happy with and "ostentatiously walked out in droves" whenever a member of the Israeli delegation spoke.

Tannenbaum said that "from the first meeting American Jewish women sensed the palpable loneliness of the Israeli delegation," consisting of about 15 members.

"We created our own entity on the spot," joined by many members of the U.S. delegation, to discuss how to stop the politicization of the conference. This group of Jewish leaders was headed by a steering committee—characterized by Tannenbaum as a "little UN of Jewish women"—with two Americans and one representative each from Switzerland, Finland, Holland, England, France, Denmark and Canada.

Amid all the isolation, "the Danish community was stalwart, both Jews and non-Jews." To counter pro-PLO propaganda, about 100 Danes, Jews and non-Jews, demonstrated in front of the building housing the conference wearing yellow Stars of David on their arms, carrying Danish and Israeli flags, and singing

Hatikva, Israel's national anthem. Within minutes they were joined by other conference delegates singing Israeli songs.

SHIRLEY JOSEPH, NATIONAL VICE-PRESIDENT, NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN

I left for Copenhagen with mixed feelings of excitement and dread. The excitement was in anticipation of the Forum, the alternative Conference sponsored by the non-governmental organizations associated with the United Nations.

The dread was for what I knew would almost certainly be the final outcome of the official Conference. It was far worse than we could ever have imagined. The PLO came prepared with a coordinated, sophisticated plan, not only to hijack the Conference, but to take over the Forum as well.

Cartons and cartons of slick, scurrilous pamphlets enabled them to keep their display table next to the front door well stocked. Posters advertising the plight of Palestinian refugees covered walls and pillars. Shepherded by a group of men who seemed to orchestrate all of their activities, young Palestinian women, in expensive Western clothes, wearing around their necks black and white kefiyahs fringed with the colors of the PLO flag, packed session after session.

Any workshop which could be politicized was attended in force. Third world and Communist countries lent support. Propagandists took over workshops and panels with vicious tirades against the United States and Israel. Over and over we heard the litany of supposed abuses and atrocities. I felt almost unbearably isolated as an American and as a Jew.

The situation was so horrifying that we found it necessary to organize a Jewish Women's Caucus to attempt to counter some of the attacks. We elected a steering committee, planned strategy and assigned women to attend workshops as a sort of a truth squad prepared to speak when necessary, and when possible, to set the record straight on the meaning of Zionism, the role of

Israel and the role of the United States in the contemporary world. As Secretary of the Steering Committee, I worked with Jewish women from Israel, England, Holland, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, Argentina, Canada, France, Italy, Uruguay and Denmark. They, together with some supportive American groups and the wonderful community of Copenhagen, provided us with the emotional support we needed to endure the eighteen days.

The opportunity to sustain the momentum of the International Women's Movement was thrown away in Copenhagen by people whose agenda did not include improved lives for women. As a result of the events of that parody of a Women's Conference, I believe that as women, as Jews, and as Americans we are facing disaster and that we had better develop strategies to prevent it. We can't start too soon.

(reprinted from NCJW Journal, Winter 1980)

I look back more in sorrow than in anger at Copenhagen. Sorrow at the poor preparation by all parties: the Israelis, as well as their Jewish and other supporters.

My greatest sorrow is reserved for the Forum—the non-official, open-ended, free-swinging mass get together that in the end proved far more important than the official U.N. conference of government representatives.

Many words have been written and many breasts have been beaten with regard to Israel and Jewish interests at these two conferences. Yes, it's true, Israel suffered a political public-relations debacle at the official conference, for which it will pay in friends and sympathy for a long time. Could it have been prevented? Probably not. Could it have been lessened? Probably yes.

And the Forum? What of the Forum? Was that a disaster as well? I say no. The Forum was a mass get-together. No general conclusions were reached, no final votes were taken, no public policy was formulated. The Forum was a loose framework

surrounding some 30 or 40 simultaneous mini-conferences. A participant could go to workshops given by one organization or one group in every available time-slot and not even know about the others.

What happened to Israeli and Jewish interests at the Forum depends on which workshops are under discussion. Ask 15 people who went to 15 different sets of workshops and you'll get 15 different, yet accurate reactions. I attended feminist workshops—mainly those organized by the International Feminist Network. In my opinion, Israel fared well, because it was represented by genuine feminists who were concerned with feminist problems and who refused to be diverted to other subjects. This approach was firmly backed by the organizers—a group of highly political European and European-based American feminists, who put women's interests above all else. These sessions were virtual enclaves of pure woman-oriented discussions, where feminist women from all over the Western and Third World (note, not Eastern) exchanged information, offered solutions to problems and took concrete steps towards forming new and strengthening existing international feminist relationships.

There was absolutely no patience for other subjects, including the Palestine problem (which so dominated the official conference) or the popular question of “can there be feminism without socialism?” (which has so captivated women's movement meetings of late). The organizers and participants in these sessions were determined not to be sidetracked into never-ending arguments on topics that only serve to divide women.

by **Joanne Yaron**, *Tel Aviv, Israel*

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