

In the air

(Wo)man the barricades!

Ariel Wagner-Parker

**On 31st December 2005,
I resigned from the job
I'd come to Luxembourg
to do nearly 27 years before.
It was a good job, interesting and
responsible, but it was time to turn
to other things.**

However since ... I dislike the word „retiring“, so will speak about „the change“, oh no wait, that's worse. I'll call it „January“. Since January, then, I've somehow felt considerably older than I did in December. And have begun to take the question of age more seriously.

When I arrived in Luxembourg, I was a young – all right, youngish – woman, with my life ahead of me. I don't basically feel any older today, in my head at least, than I did then, but the world around me is sending out messages that this is not the case. I am middle-aged and qualify, more or less, for the status of senior citizen. I am a „pensioner“, worse still, for my former colleagues, an „ancienne“ (once wonderfully translated as an „antique“). All this sounds terribly old and conjures up images of grey hair, beige leisure clothes and a totally spoilt cat.

I think I have to face the fact that if I built a barricade and climbed onto it waving the banner of freedom, I would be regarded as an aging eccentric (or God help me, an aging *terrorist*) rather than a youthful revolutionary.

Or would I?

I've cheered up immensely remembering the exploits of „Grandmothers against the war“ (GAW), an organisation founded by 74-year-old Joan Wile a couple of years ago, to protest against the war in Iraq.

Last summer, learning of the success of anti-recruitment demonstrations in other US cities, she liased with other like-minded organisations, such as *Grandmothers for Peace International*, *Gray Panthers* and *New York City Raging Grannies*, and planned a rally on 17th October 2005 in New York City.

The Grannies, aged between 49 and 90, gathered in Times Square and marched on the Recruiting Station, where they read out their statement of purpose:

„We are grandmothers heartbroken over the huge loss of life and limb in Iraq. We feel it is our patriotic duty to



Photo: grandmothersforpeace.org

We shall overcome ...

enlist in the United States military today in order to replace our grandchildren who have been deployed there far too long and are anxious to come home now while they are still alive and whole. By this action, we are not supporting the use of military force in Iraq – in fact, we are totally against it. But inasmuch as it exists, our goal in joining up is only to protect young people from further death and maiming.

We grandmothers have all had the privilege of living long lives and are willing to put ourselves in harm's way so that our own and other people's grandchildren will have a chance to enjoy full lives as we have. We believe these young men and women are being used as cannon fodder in an illegal and totally unjustified war against a nation which posed no threat to us. They were sent there on a web of lies and deceit resulting in untold harm to them and countless innocent Iraqi people.

We hope that by enlisting today we can help bring about the early end of this immoral occupation and the return of our brave young people to their homes and families ... now.“

After this, they sat down, some with considerable difficulty, outside the station door and led the crowd in singing the Raging Grannies' hymn, „God Help America“ and chanting: „We insist that we enlist.“ The police warned them their sit-in would result in a „disorderly conduct“ charge. No one budged. The police then sighed and set about arresting 18 of them – taking care the plastic handcuffs were not too tight. The Grannies were led off, singing and chanting, to the vans, other cops following with their sticks and walking-frames.

They were held at a community corrections facility for several hours, before being released with an order to appear in court in November. In March 2006, the Criminal Court denied GAW's petition to have their case dismissed and the trial was set for 20 April.

The case caught New Yorkers' imagination – everyone has a granny. Even the prosecution seemed none too thrilled at having to persuade the Court to throw

the Grannies in jail.

Protesters, including anti-war activist Cindy Sherman, came to the Manhattan courtroom in support. Their banners read: „Arrest Bush. Free the Grannies!“ and „Can't whip the insurgent? Whip Grannies!“

The Grannies pleaded not guilty and their counsel put each of them into the witness stand. They were taking no nonsense and it often seemed as if the young judge and prosecutors were the ones being cross-examined.

The charge was a simple matter of public order, the issue being whether or not they'd been blocking the recruitment-centre door. One defendant was asked if she really would have moved out of the way had someone wanted to enlist that day. „I'm a very polite person“, she responded sternly. „I'm sure you are“, replied the DA.

The 18 Grannies were acquitted.

Joan Wile was slightly frustrated that the case had been won on a public order issue rather than on the right to protest. Even so, as their counsel remarked, the war in Iraq had also been on trial.

Importantly, the Grannies were free to continue their action. In March this year, three of them, in their 70s and 80s, travelled to Berlin to address peace congregations. Their demonstrations and weekly vigils at the Rockefeller Center continue. They've even formed a singing group, *The New York Granny Chicks*, which is a hit wherever it performs. One of the Chicks' most popular numbers, *I've Got To Take Back My Country*, begins:

„The Caribbean cruise will have to wait

*the bridge club is on hold
it happens I've a very full plate
so I've no time for growing old“*

The Grannies' credo is borrowed from Martin Luther King and runs: „Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter.“

So I've decided to put getting old on hold.

Why don't we spend the summer thinking about how we can get Luxembourg's Grannies onto the barricades ...