

APRIL 3, 2016

LAST UPDATED: SUNDAY, APRIL 3, 2016, 1:21 AM

A passion for protest: Longtime Teaneck activists still taking it to the street

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Every Wednesday afternoon, regardless of the weather, Henry and Mary Shoiket join a small but dedicated group of protesters who stand at Teaneck and Liberty roads in Teaneck, calling for the United States to bring its troops home.

The Teaneck couple are driven by a passion for political activism that has spanned almost three-quarters of a century — one that admirers say hasn't softened with age. Henry will turn 98 this month and Mary, his wife of almost 64 years, is 101.

"One of the things which scares me is the fact that, you know, we have great-grandchildren," Mary said. "And when they grow up, will there be a world left?"

The Shoikets moved to Teaneck about three years ago, downsizing into an apartment after selling the house in Rutherford where they had lived for 48 years and raised two children. They have been fixtures at the weekly protests outside the Teaneck Armory for years.

Typically, Henry uses a bullhorn to recite to drivers what has become something of a signature chant — a call to bring the troops home alive, to provide more money for jobs than wars, and to expand health care. Some of the drivers acknowledge him with a honk back.

On a recent Wednesday, when the batteries in Henry's bullhorn died, he was undaunted. Walking along the sidewalk, he shouted loudly amid the bustle of passing cars and buses that the United States should "build bridges, not drones."

Paula Rogovin, who co-founded the weekly vigil in August 2005 as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were raging, said she admires and respects Henry and Mary.

"In all these years, they continue their optimism and work for a better world," said Rogovin, 68.

In an interview after bitterly cold winds prematurely ended one recent vigil, Henry and Mary discussed their unwavering dedication to activism that has spanned decades, their belief that even the smallest effort — such as calling for an end to war on a Teaneck corner every week — can make a difference.

As an example, the couple described their work, starting in the 1980s, in Nicaragua following the uprising by the socialist Sandinistas that ended a 46-year dictatorship. They visited several times, and Henry, a mechanical engineer, used to fix old bicycles



CARMINE GALASSO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Husband and wife, Henry, 98, and Mary Shoiket, 101, of Teaneck, have many years of protests behind them, and continue to be active in the anti-war movement, protesting nearly every week in front of the Teaneck Armory.

in his garage in Rutherford to send to those in need in the Central American nation. Two such shipments helped outfit a co-op of women with the means to get themselves to work at a factory on time, Mary said.

"We realized that the work and the money was worth it," Mary said.

More recently, in addition to their participation in various peace and civil rights groups, they've joined local demonstrations, also led by Rogovin, to try to stop trains carrying volatile Bakken crude oil from traveling through Teaneck and other suburban North Jersey towns.

"A lot of things have happened in our lifetime, and we have participated in demonstrations and actions all our life," Henry said.

For Mary, who was born in Hoboken and raised in Jersey City, the call to fight for peace struck early. She was just 12 years old, she said, when she developed a strong opposition to war.

"Even then I felt strongly about peace in terms of not hurting people," she said.

Henry was born in Crimea but fled with his family to Istanbul after the Russian Revolution, eventually settling in Brooklyn. He said his activism started a bit later, when he was a student at the College of the City of New York in the 1930s.

In October 1934, the college invited Fascist students from Italy to address an assembly in the its Great Hall, and the group's presentation was disrupted by student protesters. A punch was thrown, "whereupon, there was general ruckus," Henry recalled.

The students who led the protest were eventually expelled, but the episode inspired more meetings and demonstrations on the campus — all of which, Henry said, he took part in.

When Henry was younger, his political affiliations also came under question before a Senate subcommittee led by Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin.

Henry, who knew convicted spy Julius Rosenberg when they were both students at City College, was called to testify before McCarthy in December 1953. According to an account around that time by The Associated Press and transcripts from the Congressional Record, Henry refused to state whether he was a Communist or associated with Rosenberg.

According to the article, McCarthy ejected Henry from the hearing after he protested that the chairman had not asked him if he had engaged in espionage. "The answer is no," he reportedly shouted.

Recalling the McCarthy hearing, Henry said he had worked for the Navy in California and later for Boeing in Washington State at the time Rosenberg was working at Fort Monmouth in New Jersey. He said the questioning and his refusal to discuss politics led to his dismissal from Boeing, after which he landed a job at a laboratory in New York City.

"I told them [the government] that I knew nothing about espionage and I was not going to talk about their politics nor anybody else's politics," Henry said.

The first time he met Mary, at a lakeside resort in New York State in the early 1950s, underscored their inclination to stand up for what they believe in.

Henry was sitting idly by the lake when Mary approached him. She asked if he wanted to take a boat into the water. Henry obliged and along the way picked a lily to give to Mary.

He recalled his future wife's strong response: "Flowers are to be looked at, not to be plucked!"

Her reaction cemented his attraction to her. It endeared her immediately, he said.

That first meeting set the tone for their life together. Ethel Bartky, the couple's daughter who now lives in Chicago, said activism was simply the norm growing up; she frequently attended demonstrations with her parents as a child.

Bartky, 61, said her parents do more than just feel deeply and talk about the issues they care about; they put action behind their words.

"It's something that the world needs more of," she said.

Madelyn Hoffman, the director of New Jersey Peace Action, one of the groups to which the Shoikets belong, has known the couple for about 20 years.

Hoffman said the Shoikets' dedication is exemplified by their work at the Rutherford Labor Day festival. For the past 15 years, Hoffman said, the Shoikets have been instrumental in the creation of a large flier featuring a variety of information about war and nuclear weapons. Volunteers have distributed the fliers at the festivals, often in extreme heat.

Henry joined those canvassing efforts as recently as last year, while Mary manned an information table.

"They're not making concessions to time," Hoffman said.

The Shoikets don't view their long-standing passion for activism as unique, or even noteworthy. Rather, they view it simply as a calling – a mission that isn't yet complete. They are driven by what's happening in the news, staying on top of developments through the newspaper articles and opinion pieces that Henry reads to Mary every day. They say they have no plans to stop attending the weekly vigil at the busy intersection in Teaneck.

"There's not much to say," Henry said during a brief lull as he recited his chant to cars stuck in traffic. "We're here every week, and we'll continue to be as long as our legs hold."

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