

March 22, 2003

A NATION AT WAR: AT WAR AT HOME; As Wars Come and Go, Ralph Keeps Protesting

By **DAN BARRY**

For this war to be official, it needs a president, a government, a multibillion-dollar military effort and a guy named Ralph. That is the way it has been for more than 60 years, and that is the way it is today. The country goes to war in Iraq, and Ralph reaches again for his "Stop the War" stickers.

Ralph DiGia is small and hunched, with wild white hair and a beard to match; he looks like a Santa's helper gone AWOL. He joined the rain-soaked protest in Times Square on Thursday evening, and he will be at the march for peace in Midtown today, because that is what Mr. DiGia does. It is what makes him breathe.

"If I wasn't doing this I don't think I'd be 88," he said.

The military has its heroes, and so too does the nonviolence movement: the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., of course, and Dorothy Day, and Bayard Rustin -- and Ralph DiGia. The others are long dead, but Mr. DiGia still comes to the War Resisters League office, near the Bowery, almost every day. He sits there and plots for peace, undisturbed by the clatter of passing subway trains that send tremors through the worn wooden floor at his feet.

Mr. DiGia and other members of the league find themselves once again calling for an end to war, this time while a nonstop television program called "Operation Iraqi Freedom" mesmerizes much of the country. They know that conducting antiwar protests can be misconstrued by some as unpatriotic, and they heatedly debate strategy. Should they embrace the familiar tactic of blocking traffic, for example, or will that antagonize more people than it attracts?

Window smashing and other random acts of vandalism, though, remain out of the question for the league, which says that it advocates "Gandhian nonviolence as the method for creating a democratic society free of war, racism, sexism and human exploitation." Others may debate the nuances of this mission statement; Mr. DiGia just does it, following a gut sense that war is a crime against humanity.

"There's a greater purity about the space that Ralph occupies," said Carmen Trotta, a member of the league's executive committee. "He just has heartfelt beliefs about the human family."

Mr. DiGia grew up on the Upper West Side, the son of an immigrant barber. In 1927, when Mr. DiGia was 12, his father took him to a rally protesting the imminent execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, whose murder trial centered on their radical political beliefs.

"My first demonstration," Mr. DiGia said, smiling.

In 1941, Mr. DiGia received his draft notice, but reported instead to the United States attorney's office to announce that he was a conscientious objector. After being convicted of failure to report for induction in 1943, he was sent to a federal penitentiary in Danbury, Conn., where he helped lead a successful effort to integrate the prison dining hall.

Mr. DiGia served 28 months in prison and returned to New York, where he got a job with a small accounting firm and started volunteering at the War Resisters League. A decade later, in 1955, the league hired him to keep the books and he has been a part of the organization ever since -- "a limb" of the league's body, Mr. Trotta said -- staying on to answer phones and oversee mass mailings even after his forced retirement in 1996.

Through the decades, he has participated in hundreds of demonstrations against American wars and policies. He vaguely recalled that the last of his many arrests was at the United Nations, but he vividly remembered the 30-day sentence he got for protesting the country's civil defense drills in the mid-1950's. He can talk about the F.B.I. files ("Stuff like, 'Ralph DiGia

drove up in a Chevrolet and started passing out leaflets' "), as well as about the time the office was ransacked.

Mr. DiGia took a few moments to ponder this question: Why do you do this? Others his age are at rest, and yet here he is, surrounded by stacks of the league's solicitation letters ("Dear friend: This is a very frightening time. . . ."), while an assistant young enough to be his granddaughter shouts that the ringing telephone is for him.

"It's almost like being selfish," he said finally. "It makes me feel good. It's meaningful to me. Otherwise, what would I be doing? Supporting these terrible things?"

Among the many antiwar stickers adorning the office, there is one for the Mets. Ralph DiGia, pacifist, is also Ralph DiGia, baseball fan, who has learned to combine passions when attending Mets games at Shea Stadium: cheer for the home team, but do not stand for "The Star-Spangled Banner."

"We sit, the others stand, and the game goes on," he said.

Photo: Ralph DiGia has protested wars for decades. "It's almost like being selfish," he says. "It makes me feel good." (Ruby Washington/The New York Times)