

Vacation From War

Dialogues across Borders



Dialogue Seminars and Youth Encounters 2018

New Perspectives, new challenges

In the former Yugoslavia, 120 young people met for the annual Youth encounter in Split, Croatia this year for the first time, as the hotel in Basko Polje, which we used in previous years, was closed.

Split is generally considered a stronghold of Croatian nationalists. The World Cup and the behavior of fans of the Croatian national team intensified the nationalist sentiments. Some parents of youngsters from Serbia as well as older staff members who themselves have lived through the war were concerned about the safety of the participants, which somewhat overshadowed the encounter this year.

Out of fear of nationalistic hostility and assaults, for the first time in ten years, there was no public performance, in which the young people normally take their message of peace to the streets with theater performances or dances. The press was also not informed of the Youth encounter.

The youngsters themselves were not influenced by the nationalist mood or the fears of the adults - perhaps precisely because of the different environ-

ment, the political workshops on the war were especially profound this year.

As announced this spring, in the Israel-Palestine project part of *Vacation From War*, there were some changes this year. The deteriorating political situation on the ground - and the hostility and threats it comes with for individuals and organizations that promote dialogue between people from Israel and Palestine - make implementing dialogue seminars increasingly difficult.

We were all the more amazed to encounter numerous groups interested in cooperating with *Vacation From War* during our exploratory journey in spring. Working with new partners brought a lot of new things - along with familiar ones. Detailed reports would go far beyond the scope of this autumn bulletin, but we still want to share at least a few impressions.

This year's women* seminar took place under new coordination. The seminar offers a safe space for women* in which the respective experiences in the conflict and the occupation can be discussed openly and respectfully.

This is encouraging for many of the par-

Dialogue Seminars and Youth Encounters 2018

Ende of July 2018

120 Participants from Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina met in Split (Croatia).

July and August 2018

50 members of the „Youth United in Peace“-network met for one week in Bački Monoštor (Serbia), 40 participants in Novi Sad (Serbia).

September 2018

50 YU-Peace members met in Tuzla (BiH).

June and July 2018

In Nablus (Westbank) und Khan Younis (Gaza Strip), *Vacation From War* supported once again Summer Games for Palestinian kids.

Early August 2018

58 young women* from the Palestinian Westbank and from Israel met in Germany for dialogue.

End of August 2018

44 youngsters and young adults from Israel and the Palestinian Westbank met in Germany for dialogue.



ticipants: “For me personally, it was very important to attend a seminar only for women. That helped me feel safe. I am not at all sure whether I would have attended a mixed seminar” (Israeli participant).

This year, the second seminar was led and designed by an Israeli-Palestinian organization that, in terms of group composition, includes Palestinians from the West-bank and Jewish Israelis as well as Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, trying to capture the complexity of population composition in Israel and Palestine through a triangle-

approach. The participants were between the ages of 15 and 23, meaning that for the first time in many years we have been working not only with young adults, but also with youngsters from this region.

There were also some methodological differences: in this second seminar, theater and media education approaches framed the discussions in the two groups about the participants’ personal, family and historical narratives of in connection with the conflict and the occupation.

The discussions were by no means less political or confrontational, on the contrary: “Theater has proven itself as a suitable means of conflict transformation. The group’s process was emotional, touching and challenging. Sometimes maybe even too challenging, specifically *because we worked with theater*”, one of the theater group’s facilitators shared, reflecting upon the seminar.

Like for many adult participants, the two weeks were also a turning point for many of the youngsters, often associated with an (identity) crisis, since much of what they believed in so far crumbles and things they learnt in school or in their families suddenly appear to be a “lie”.

One of the challenges now is to deepen discussions, continue the often emotionally very challenging dialogue process and consolidate own opinions and experiences. Particularly with youth, it is all the more important to accompany these processes intensively and long term.

This will happen in the course of a two-years’ process at numerous uni- and bi-national follow-up meetings.

“Gaza is like a microcosm of the conflict”

The women* seminar included a day with the motto “Open space”, where in six different workshops, topics were dealt with which were selected, prepared and moderated by the participants themselves.

In this interview, one of the coordinators of the seminar talks about the workshop on the situation in Gaza and the significance of the discussion about Gaza for the conflict. The workshop was jointly facilitated by Palestinian and Israeli participants. The coordinator her-

self was present as a participant in the workshop.

How did the idea for the Gaza workshop come up?

The day before the workshops, we were on a trip to Maastricht and everyone heard the news: Gaza is being bombed and rockets are being fired into Israeli territories. This finally gave Yael (*name changed*), an Israeli participant, the opportunity to propose the topic for an Open Space Workshop. The situation in Gaza is actually always pre-

sent for Israelis and Palestinians. Since there was no specific space for the topic in the seminar and no participants from Gaza could be present, this topic was all the more important to Yael.

How was the workshop?

First of all, it was noticeable that this workshop group was the smallest of all. Usually we make sure that all groups are the same size, but in this case, it was different. Many were afraid to participate because it is such a sensitive topic.

To get started, the facilitators asked the group what thoughts they have when they think about Gaza.

The result was a collection of thoughts, which above all contained many negative terms, such as "humanitarian crisis", "violence", "narrowness" etc. The facilitators focused on a central question: "How did the siege on Gaza start?" - and it was really impressive what this seemingly simple question triggered. Each participant had a completely different answer.

In the meantime, the discussion ran the risk of slipping into a spiral of justifications and accusations - along the lines of "Yes, but we are doing this because you did this other thing to us", etc. But the facilitators kept bringing the discus-

sion back to the central question of the beginning of the siege on Gaza. And that was very constructive, because it forced the participants to try to understand the position of the others and to rethink their understanding of the situation.

Rethink it in what way?

There is a clear narrative on the Israeli side, which is communicated without question: Israel gave Gaza independence, but then the people living there decided to attack Israel, and that is why there is a siege. On the other hand, there were at least two Palestinian participants, for example, who ignored the fact that rockets were also fired at Israel. They said things like: "Why is Israel attacking Gaza when the people living there have done nothing? At this point, I could clearly see that the Israeli participants in particular were very angry and basically dropped out of the discussion.

How could you resolve this?

I intervened and asked everyone to look at the facts. And I briefly summarized the events. It is very difficult, especially for Palestinian women, and I could understand the participants very well. Because they are so used to hearing the eternal apology of "self-defense" for any form of violence by Israel that some found it difficult to understand that it does not help anyone to ignore the Israeli victims. And that I did not want to undermine their arguments with my account of the events.

What makes Gaza such an important and sensitive issue?

Gaza is like a microcosm of the conflict and the occupation. And many of the questions that came up in the

workshop are core issues of the conflict. And because a discussion about Gaza puts core issues of the conflict on the agenda, many people are afraid to discuss them. But I think that by addressing various issues in this workshop, some participants were able to draw important conclusions for the conflict as a whole.

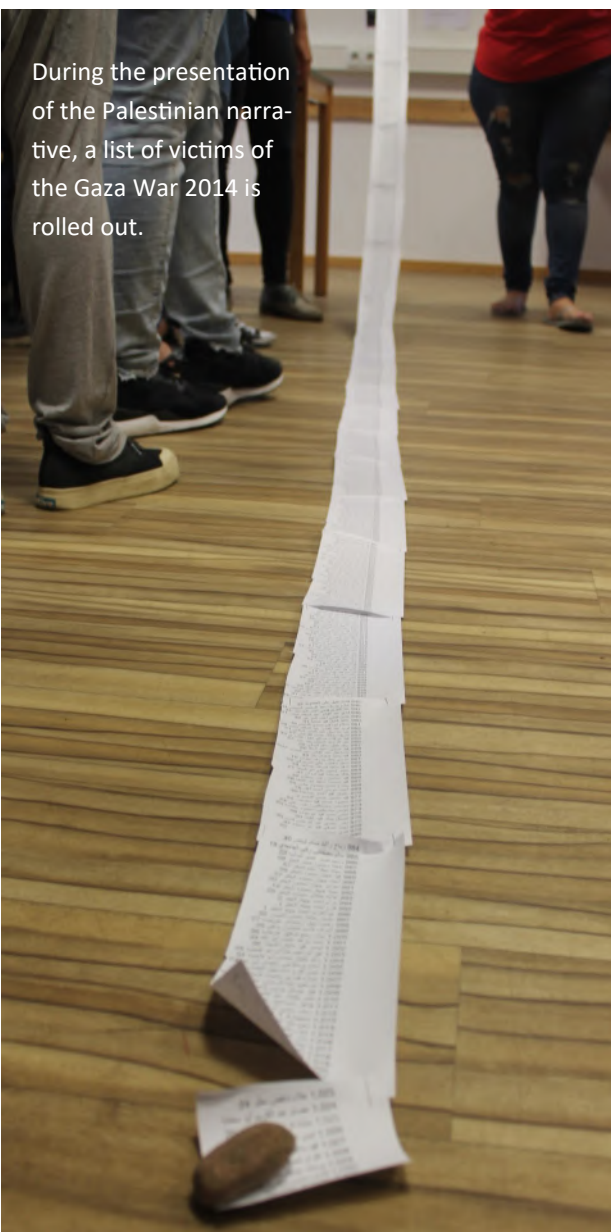
For example, the question of who actually benefits from the occupation.

Among other things, Gaza is an important issue for the arms industry: every time there is a war in Gaza, the share prices of certain large arms companies rise, and Israel is one of the world's biggest arms exporters. Israeli society as a whole does not benefit, of course, but some private companies do. And the special thing about Israel compared to other states like Germany or the USA is that they can label their weapons "battle-proved" as soon as they have been used against Gaza, for example. And everything that is "battle-proved" is much more prestigious and sells better.

The participants also talked about the different governments. Many Israeli participants were unaware that Hamas became part of the government through elections, and how differently many people in Palestine perceive the role of Hamas and Fatah - this is by no means in line with current discourse in Israel.

It is also important for Israelis to better understand the situation in Gaza, because they too are suffering. However, it is often sold to Israelis as if all the measures on Gaza were taken to protect them.

But it adds a lot to a more complex understanding to also look at who the profiteers of the situation are.



During the presentation of the Palestinian narrative, a list of victims of the Gaza War 2014 is rolled out.



Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina

“I would have never thought to find people with whom I can talk about the war“

One of the workshops on the war in the former Yugoslavia during the Peace Camp in Split was based on photographs by war photographer Ron Haviv.

The facilitators showed the pictures uncommented, in most pictures, it was impossible to identify which ethnic group the perpetrators and victims, respectively, belonged to. The youngsters had the task to describe what they saw and what they felt when seeing these photographs. Many felt horror, disgust and a deep lack of understanding when faced with some of the atrocities committed. At the end of the workshop, a list of the dead, injured and displaced persons from all sides involved was displayed. Everyone was very moved, some youngsters hugged, a few even cried.

The young people discussed so enthusiastically - the scheduled time didn't suffice.

Although there was still a great need for further discussion, the group unfortunately had to go to lunch immediately after the workshop. Additional discussion time was therefore offered in the evening. About 25 young people ca-

me, including Hamed, who had already been very involved in the workshop in the morning.

He shared that his father had just turned 18 when Mladic's forces took power in besieged Srebrenica. When they separated men and women, Hamed's father got on the bus with the women and children. A Serbian soldier dragged him out of the bus and wanted to push him to the group of men. Another Serb prevented this, let him get back on the bus and through this, saved his life.

Hamed had been researching about the war online for years but has been unable to talk to anyone about it. "I never thought there would be anything like this," he said. "People with whom I can talk about the war." Many other youngsters felt the same way.

The war remains a taboo topic in many families. At school, the "own" troops are mostly celebrated as heroes, while the "Others" are war criminals. We asked Hamed to offer his own workshop on the war. "It was like a history seminar at the university," one participant enthusiastically commented after the workshop.

Donate and Support

Vacation From War Project is funded almost exclusively through private donations. Many participants are surprised when hearing about the many people support them, place their trust in them and encourage them. Many of our supporters collect donations at family celebrations, in memory of loved ones or share information materials of the project among friends or during events.

Whenever time permits, we gladly present the project with your peace groups, initiatives or parishes!

We are happy to send you our Annual Reports and Bulletins free of charge.

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Editorial B. Kläß, K. Ochsendorf, T. Pariyar
Committee for Fundamental Rights and Democracy

Project *Vacation From War*

Aquinostr. 7-11 | 50670 Köln, Germany

phone 0221 - 97 26 918

info@ferien-vom-krieg.de

www.vacation-from-war.com

The work of *Vacation From War* is supported by the Foundation *Dialogues & Encounters*.



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