

Vacation from War

Dialogues across Borders



Autumn Bulletin 2021

Dear donors,

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2021 is no ordinary year for Vacation from War - the Corona pandemic continues to have a significant impact on life in the project regions, and due to travel restrictions in Israel and Palestine, as well as in the former Yugoslavia, the possibilities for cross-border encounters and dialogue meetings are still considerably limited. This has changed the rhythm of our work - while most activities used to be concentrated in the summer months, more activities than usual are now taking place throughout the year.

A lot of spontaneity, flexibility and also the willingness to prepare meetings and activities with the risk of them not being able to take place has been required from our partners in recent months. This was necessary in order to be able to use those periods for meetings and dialogue work when infection numbers were low and restrictions for travel and physical meetings were relaxed. We are therefore very happy that the partners in both project regions were able to organise a number of acti-

vities and meetings in spite of the continuing difficult conditions.

In Israel, the Israeli team of the women*seminar organised two political tours for former participants and a weekend seminar to discuss the current political situation and political visions for the future.

The Palestinian participants of the women*seminar 2019 also met for a weekend seminar in Thalita Kumi, Beit Jala. In addition, the long-planned facilitation training for Palestinians could finally begin. For the Palestinian team in particular, it is a challenge to find new members - not only because dialogue work in the Palestinian (and increasingly also in the Israeli) context implies great risks and regularly also political repression, but also because there are only few offers for trainings in the field of facilitation in the West Bank., especially for trainings with a focus on binational facilitation for political dialogue. The next part of the training is planned for October. Due to the political escalation in May and the Corona pandemic, the planned binational meeting of former Israeli and Palestinian participants could not (yet) take place.

The second partnership in Israel and Palestine, which works on dialogue with Jewish Israelis, Palestinians with Israeli citizenship and Palestinians from the West Bank, is now in the second phase of its strategy and planning process, which aims at starting with new dialogue groups in autumn 2022. The first meetings and discussions with former participants and staff have taken place, many alumni are involved in the process through questionnaires and interviews, and a final conceptual planning seminar is scheduled for winter 2021/22 in Cyprus or Jordan.

In the former Yugoslavia, various activities took place continuously in the local partner cities, and youngsters from Srebrenica also visited their friends in Tuzla. At the beginning of August, on the initiative of Vlasta Markovic, a long-time YU-Peace activist, a joint visit to the "War Childhood Museum" was realised.

The highlight of the summer for all partners in the former Yugoslavia, however, was the meeting in Medena, Croatia (see next page). Numerous political workshops and discussions motivated the participants to

(continue to) work for peace and take a stand against hatred and nationalism. Mujo Adzemovic from Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje summarised

this as follows: *"We will always and everywhere stand in the way of all those who preach hatred, and I am sure they are far fewer than us. Let*

us raise our voices and give them no leeway whatsoever. We can do it!"

"Every victim is mine, no criminal is mine"

(Author: Brigitte Klaß) This statement became the motto for the participants of the Peace Camp in Medena, Croatia, in whose home countries war criminals are still or again increasingly celebrated as war heroes. The participants came from Vukovar (Croatia), Sombor (Serbia), Tuzla, Srebrenica and Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje (Bosnia and Herzegovina). For the first time, a group from the Brcko district, where a former participant now works,

As we feared that parents would not allow their underage children to participate due to the pandemic, we agreed to accept more adult participants as an exception this year. We cut the group size in half, shortened the duration of the stay and adapted the content to the new circumstances.

Only four weeks before the planned date, it finally was confirmed that the groups from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina could en-

ter themselves with Antigen tests brought from Germany. The hotel provided us with a private dining room and the hotel 'disco', a big space in the basement, with a very efficient air filter system was a safe place for discussions and workshops. Therefore, the whole group could listen to lectures and discuss together. Our concept worked: Noone got infected with Corona and in fact it was the first time in 22 years that we needed neither medical advice nor run to a pharmacy for any medication.

In terms of content, we focused on the effects of the war that still determine life in all three countries and invited speakers who showed how change is possible and who stand up for a society in which people are not divided according to ethnic categories and played off against each other. The programme inspired



Participants follow the lectures with excitement

took part as well.

Prior to the meeting, we had discussed very intensively in Germany and with our local partners whether we could take the risk and responsibility of a cross-border meeting under the conditions of the pandemic and how such a meeting could be conducted in a reasonably safe manner.

ter Croatia. Since youngsters from some cities eventually received permission from their parents to come along, the group ultimately had an age range between 16 and 29 years.

We agreed on strict Corona rules: All participants, including vaccinated ones, had to arrive with a negative PCR test, temperature was taken every morning and every other day the whole group tested them-

red the participants and motivated them to work for social change themselves:

"Tahir Zustra is a former participant who is now implementing what he once learned at a camp. As a journalist for Nova BH Television, he is one of the few who work objectively and very professionally to improve people's lives. (Editor's note: Through one of his reports he achieved for example that severely

disabled children got wheelchairs). His work is an inspiration for us and a Call to Action to also actively do something for those who need help." - Adrijan Prodan, Sombor

"This camp opened my eyes and changed my view of the whole world. Living in an environment where people spread hatred and judge other people's worth by their nationality, religion or sexual orientation, it is very hard to form an independent opinion and not 'judge the book by its cover'. I was really amazed at how friendly, loving and above all peaceful everything was. We worked together to grow as individuals and discussed positive changes in our cities.

This project shows us a way to improve the world and spread the message of peace." - Erna Sabitovic, Tuzla



"Peace is a very special and precious state. While in war we are reduced to what we need to survive, peace allows us to spread our wings and develop all our talents and abilities. We should never take peace for granted, it is not a constant state but a process that

we have to work on again and again. We (...) want to be the generation that prepares the ground for a better life for their children." - Mujo Adzemovic, Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje

Finding new talents: Facilitation training for former participants from the West Bank

(Author: Rana K.) On 14 August 2021, the kick-off workshop of our facilitation training took place, attended by a total of eight women* from the Dialogue seminars of previous years. It was a very intense meeting: for many, it was a reunion after a long time, others got to know each other anew - and for all of them the meeting triggered a renewed reflection on their own past seminar processes.

The aim of the training series is to teach the women* the skills to facilitate a dialogue group and to accompany its process throughout a seminar. There are otherwise no trainings to learn these skills available in the West Bank. We decided to start the training with our own experiences in binational tandem facilitation (one Israeli, one Palestinian facilitator), which we practise in the dialogue seminars. In addition to an introduction to facilitation methods, we also shared tools for self-reflection and talked with the participants about

the particularities and pitfalls of facilitating political dialogue processes.

The women* were very inquisitive and engaged in the day's programme. They brought many topics for discussion, especially the challenges they have recently faced in the wake of the pandemic, but also those challenges resulting from the effects of the dialogue seminar in Germany on their lives in Palestine (...).

At the same time, we used the space of

learning together to build a network between the women* in which they can support each other in the future.

The next part of the facilitation training will take place in October. At that meeting, we will try out different facilitation methods and especially talk about difficult situations while facilitating.



Facilitation training for former Palestinian participants of the women* seminars



Speaker's tour in September: "Creating dialogue spaces is my form of resistance"

From September 9th to September 13th, we organized a Speakers Tour in five different cities with the two coordinators of the Palestinian-Israeli women* seminar. Every evening, they shared their experiences in dialogue work, the successes and challenges and method and structure of the dialogue process that the participants go through. At the same time, they described their very personal life journeys that led them into dialogue work. Rana K. (name changed), Palestinian coordinator, described what motivates her to continue: *"We can't keep on living like this - creating dialogue spaces is my form of resistance against the occupation and I am convinced that this is the path to real change."*

Attendance at the events varied, no doubt the renewed increase in corona numbers was one reason. We were particularly pleased with the great interest audiences showed in Marburg and Ludwigsburg. We also held events in Frankfurt a. M., Cologne and Heidelberg.

"The current political situation gives no cause for hope", said Dina G., who coordinates the project on the Israeli side. *"But seeing how many women* go through an intensive process in just two short seminar weeks, a process which is profound and often eye-opening, always gives me new motivation."* What beca-

me clear in the lectures is that on the one hand, the path of dialogue work is a slow and arduous one and on the other hand, that our partners consider it one of the few effective and sustainable ways to convince people to critically reflect upon and often also to reconsider their point of view and long-held beliefs.

In the discussions that followed the lectures, many interesting questions came up: from the the long-term impact of the dialogue work and its methodological implementation, to questions about the political situation in Israel and Palestine and the role and relevance of cooperation with German partners.

Dina G. concluded her presentation with a personal appeal: *"Change must happen on many levels. We are working for political dialogue at grassroots level, but we also need other initiatives that address politics, for example. But also on the international level we need people who take a stand."*

We will report in detail about the different events in our 2021 annual report, but overall this pilot series was a success for us. We thank the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation as well as its regional foundations in North Rhine-Westphalia, Baden-Württemberg and Hessen for their financial support.

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Editorial

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Committee for Fundamental Rights and Democracy

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