



## Bosnian-Initiative

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# Vacations from war

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### **The *Vacation from the War* campaign, summer 2002 Steps toward the concrete utopia of a peaceful world on the example of the Middle East and the Balkan wars.**

Nine years ago the *Committee for Basic Rights and Democracy* (Cologne, Germany) started organizing summer camps for children and meetings between young people from war zones, financed by private "vacation-sponsorships". For seven years the *Bosnian-Initiative* and *Courage against Racism* (Frankfurt, Germany) take part in organizing the campaign *Vacations from war*. In recent years many American sponsors also supported the project because Katha Pollitt asked for donations in her column in the „*The Nation*“ magazine.

Altogether over 15,000 children, youths and accompanying responsible adults, most of whom, refugees and orphans, are victims of the Balkan wars, have spent two weeks with their supposed enemies, eating at the same table, laughing, talking, and sometimes grieving together.

In the call for donations for the summer of 2002 we also announced plans for such **meetings for young people from Israel and Palestine**, though at that time it seemed unlikely that we would be able to realize this project, since the war was escalating almost daily. The six months of preparations took place under a dark cloud of worry, since they were met on both sides with scepticism: the time for speaking and negotiating was said to be past. Few still saw any prospects in dialogue. Young people, especially, were taking a big risk, for they could be denounced by both sides for "**collaborating with the enemy**", with very serious consequences, especially for the Palestinians. And then suddenly there were more

young people who wanted such meetings, under great difficulties, than we could finance.

Gratifying support for the project from German diplomats in Israel and Jordan and a member of the German parliament came about presumably owing to the fact that no other common summer camps for groups from Israel and Palestine (West Bank) took place this summer, neither in Germany nor anywhere else. A German Secret-Service-Officer still wanted to prevent the entry of "so many Palestinians" when the first of them were already here, on the grounds that after September 11 the possibility could not be excluded that terrorists would sneak into Germany. At the last minute visas were distributed to **all three groups, altogether 45 Israelis and 45 Palestinians**.

It is difficult for the few German participants to come to general conclusions since processes in the three groups ran very differently.

**Palestinians from the West Bank, who had got around the curfew in a most risky and dangerous manner**, participated in all three meetings. One young man had hidden under the load in a truck to get to Jericho and then to Jordan via the Allenby border bridge. The parents of some participants on both sides knew only that they had been invited to Germany but not that they would meet with "the others". Some of the Israeli participants are conscientious objectors refusing military service in the occupied territories, who were just then branded "**traitors of the fatherland**" by Sharon and marked for

even more severe persecution than usual. They wanted to avoid further increasing existing pressure on their families with the additional reproach of "collaboration with the enemy". Some of the Palestinians were even more **afraid of persecution**. The influence of various violent groups has grown since Israeli attacks on the authorities have destroyed rudimentary state structures.

The first day began with a warm-up phase with social-psychological confidence-games and a juggling workshop. The fragile opening mood was shattered by the news of the Israeli air attack on a Hamas leader in **Gaza, in which fifteen children and adults were killed; among them, acquaintances of some participants**. The Palestinian group set up a mourning room and withdrew to it while the Israelis sat there deeply moved, at a loss. Two Palestinians who live in Israel contributed most to overcoming the paralysis. The Israelis went to the mourning ceremony looking very insecure.

The Palestinians accepted them, and the initially somewhat tense mood gradually dissolved into an intimate, sympathetic gathering. To conclude the ritual everyone took a swallow of strong black coffee seasoned with cardamom. For all involved it was a stirring entry into the discussions, which then became a sincere effort to understand each other. In the second week of the seminar came the revenge for the attack in Gaza, namely the **suicide bombing in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem**.

Some of the Jewish and Arabian Israelis were students there. The cafeteria where the attack took place is a meeting place of Arabian students. "Why there, of all places?" asked a Palestinian Israeli. "Why do these suicide attacks only frighten you when Palestinians may die in them?" asked the dismayed Israeli in reply. The tension between these two gripping events brought about – despite many differences of opinion – a close atmosphere between the participants. Most of them enjoyed contact with their counterparts in their free time and on excursions.

In the second group the **Neve Shalom-Wahat al Salam peace school met with representatives of the Palestinian peace movement**. On the surface you couldn't tell who came from where. The latent tension became clear when the Palestinian

youth wanted to hold a "cultural evening" and then **acted out Israeli attacks**: a refugee camp, the body searches in the streets, the house searches, the shooting of a pregnant woman on her way to the hospital, shots at men trying to save the wounded, etc. Some Israeli participants were shocked, trying to explain that they themselves opposed the occupation. They were pushed into the defensive, apologizing for things that they themselves criticized politically. Others reacted with unbelieving denial and defended their government in the fight against terrorism and the suicide killers – perhaps more loyally than they would have without this provocative performance. Feelings were stirred up, discussions passionate. When one of the Jewish youths wanted to bake bread (Chala) on Friday for the evening meal (Kabat- Shabat), this was not taken as counter-provocation by the Palestinians; on the contrary, they helped with the baking and **all participated respectfully in the Shabat ceremony**.



The seminar contents dealt with, among other things the differing ways of looking at recent history. **What is for the Israelis the holiday of national foundation is for the Palestinians the trauma of expulsion and disgrace (Nakba)**. An activist from the Israeli peace movement has started an initiative to mark the destruction of Arabian villages with commemorative plaques, for without remembrance and confession of guilt, reconciliation is unthinkable. He showed a short film about putting up such plaques which deeply impressed the young people on both sides.

After the discussion of perspectives on the future, a group of young people draw, out of the Palestinian and the Israeli flags, a new **flag for an utopian, peaceful state, whose name has not yet been decided**: Ispal or Palis or Phantasialand. Everyone agreed that the way to it would be long,

one which has to lead through the coexistence of two states.

**The atmosphere in the third group was cool to hostile for a long time.** The Palestinians appeared at first as a consistently closed unit, - both real and symbolic-, wearing the Palestinian shawl. Some held it to be their exclusive mission in the small groups to let the Israelis know about the long suffering of their people. Thus they avoided any personal contact. Visits to the House of History and to memorials to the Nazi terror touched some of them, while others reacted more defensively. They only wanted to see themselves as victims. They didn't want to develop any understanding for the roots of the suffering of the Jewish people, nor for their current fear of **suicide attacks**, which were said to be a weak weapon in comparison to the Israeli tanks, and the only one they had. **But the confrontation softened on this question.** Some in the group condemned the suicide attacks in principle; others found them legitimate only when directed against Israeli military positions and not against civilians. Some members of the Israeli groups then described the militarization of their society, in which many social services depend on completing military service, and how difficult it is to avoid the social pressure and refuse military duty. Some had themselves declared insane by a doctor, so that they couldn't get a driving licence and had no chance to enter public service professions. "I was a soldier because I had to be; otherwise I would never have been able to become a teacher," said a young woman. "Is it legitimate to kill me for this reason?" A Palestinian responded excitedly, "Your tanks have been in front of our house for months now; a cannon barrel bored through our wall and went on into our kitchen. A little boy from our neighborhood was shot because he ran across the street during the curfew, and you're jointly responsible for that!"

In the last days some minor events signalled that the ice had slowly begun to melt: the seating plan began to loosen up at meals. Some of the Palestinian women, particularly, withdrew from the group pressure and got involved in personal conversations. But the men, too, played football, table tennis and billiards.

Walks provided good opportunities to see each other as individuals outside the groups. Talks were not only harmless but also intensive. One

Palestinian said, "When I came, the most important thing was to convince the others that all our refugees have to return to their places of origin - to Palestine, at any rate, but also to Israel. In the past few days I have seen that it will simply not be possible. I have come to understand the Israelis' fears about this. Now I'll be going home soon. I'll have to think a lot there for some weeks.

**I now know that we will have to make compromises. It is very hard for us, but now I have found out that it is also hard for the Israelis."**

At the final meeting a Palestinian said he had already taken part in many such discussions, that that had changed nothing, that the Israelis had taken his land and his dignity, and now threatened him with weapons. Now he had to return to the unchanged situation. "True, I have been able to tell the Israelis what their government is doing to us, but that doesn't change anything. I hate them!" he said, looking at a young Jewish woman, who was visibly shocked, struggling to keep her composure.

Later he went into the village, bought a **blue** rose and gave it to her.

This young Palestinian, who alone avoided all personal contact with the "others" for two weeks, had recently lost several family members in an Israeli attack. Grief and fury, pain and hate marked his behavior. Nevertheless he had come here with great difficulty to meet young Israelis and was in the end capable of an affectionate gesture.

In spring we also planned "**Vacations from war**" for smaller children from the occupied territories. Owing to the curfew we could only realize vacation plays and theater workshops on a small scale.

Despite high costs in money and energy for the meetings between young Israelis and Palestinians, the "**Vacations from War**" have taken place **once more in the Balkans** on the scale planned - and in Kosovo with comparable difficulties.

**Over 1700 children and youths from the hostile sections of the population met in 14 resorts on the Adriatic in Montenegro and Croatia, and on Ohrid Lake in Macedonia.**

**The impossible became reality in Kosovo.** There the hostility between Albanians and Serbians is nearly insurmountable, despite the

powerful presence and high costs of the UN administration. Fighting continues in the divided town Mitrovica, where children are driven to school in armored vehicles, etc. At present the German government is inflaming this powder keg by wanting to deport masses of refugees.

And yet three common summer camps took place for the first time in Kosovo, too, though the Serbian part came from the north of the country (Mitrovica) and the Albanian part from its southern region (Rahovac) and the other way round. Mixed groups from the divided town Mitrovica were not yet possible. That a Serbian boy danced with an Albanian girl in the evening disco caused heated discussions at first, but by the end of the vacation it was no longer a problem. In the beginning **Roma gypsy children** were especially hard to integrate, because their ethnic group was rejected by both sides. They were especially persecuted, suspected by the Albanian majority to have supported the Serbians in the war. But then the Romas played an especially integrative role, for they knew both languages and frequently served as translators or mediators.

Last summer **Slavic and Albanian children from the war zones in Macedonia** enjoyed themselves at Ohrid Lake, while the army and the KLA (UCK) were shooting at each other in the north of the country. The "miracle of Ohrid", as the Macedonian press called it at the time, almost became normal, although tensions intensified during the course of the summer owing to imminent elections.

While swimming, dancing, at handicrafts and sports in Zivogosce, people from **Croatia and Serbia** met just as casually as did the former enemies of the **three ethnic groups from**

**Bosnia.** For example Muslim expellees and orphans from Srebrenica spent the vacation with Serbian refugees now living in Srebrenica. That these people lived together peacefully under one roof is still a rare exception.

In one group young people who had already participated in the Vacation from War campaign in the last years came together to discuss in mixed groups the changes this experience had brought about in themselves and their social surroundings.

In the past five years the borders between the Croats and Muslims in the hermetically divided town of **Gornji-Vakuf-Uskoplje** (Lesser Mostar) has grown increasingly permeable, thanks to the common vacations.

400 Serbian children from **Yugoslavia** and Bosnia travelled to the Adria in Bijela, Montenegro. Some of them already had to flee twice in their young lives (Krajina in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999), and they are still living under miserable conditions in refugee camps.

At the first summer camp this year, what we had all long feared came about: an intestinal virus raged, not differentiating between ethnic groups. 100 sick children in one house! Yet even this stressful situation had a positive effect: none of those caring for them asked whether the child came from **Croatia or Serbia** or who was responsible. All made a common effort to make sure that the vacation nevertheless ran restfully and cheerfully.

As by a miracle, all 15,000 children who could take part in the project **Vacations from War** the last years have returned home, healthy and relaxed.

**If you want to support „Vacations from War“ please make out a check to „Bosnian Initiative-Summer-Camps“ and send it to Katha Pollitt c/o The Nation, 33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003**

**If you want to support „Vacations from War“ and you need a tax exempt 501 (C 3) please ask for a CAF Amerika Gift Form because „Courage gegen Rassismus“ with the grant purpose „summer-camps“ is registered as an eligible organisation by CAF America ( Coleen Tighe (703) 549-8931, [info@cafamerica.org](mailto:info@cafamerica.org), [www.allaboutgiving.org/america](http://www.allaboutgiving.org/america).**

**Please send a copy to: Helga Dieter, Flussgasse 8, D 60489 Frankfurt, Germany**

Further examples, Placards, photos and videos (VHS-system) are available from Helga Dieter  
**At the beginning of next year you will receive the call for donations for the "Vacation from the War 2003" with more detailed reports on the summer camps this year.**

**Please pass this report on. Please pass this report on. Please pass this report on.**