

Hava Beller visits participants in Israel + Palestine

In spring 2004 Hava Beller called me. A German friend of hers had told her about the project "Vacation from War". She introduced herself as a documentary film-maker, who got several awards. She was very much interested to make a film about the Israeli-Palestinian encounters. I had to regret because these young people are very shy and afraid concerning media. Coming back home it could happen to many Israeli that they are regarded as traitors with harsh consequences in social life. For many Palestinians the situation could become really dangerous because of fanatic neighbours .

Nevertheless Hava became involved in the project. In autumn 2005 she visited Israel and Palestine and met many participants and facilitators on both sides.

Helga Dieter



My meetings with former participants of "Vacation from War" (Oct. 2005).

A report by Hava Beller

It was a brilliant Autumn day in October, awash with sun light, crisp air, brilliant colors. We were driving on a tree-lined street with white-washed, red-roofed houses, Bougovilias, Red Hibiscuses, greenery, as we were moving towards the meeting place. Suddenly a terrain of huge sun-bleached rocks rose before us, breathtaking, like an apparition.

At the checkpoint, a young soldier offered me a chair. I unfurled my green umbrella, sat and waited. Soon, my cell phone rang:

"Where are you?",

"Here, I said. Where are you?"

"Here" he answered.

We were both "here", but we couldn't see each other. We were at the thin amorphous line of an invisible Border. A Frontier?

I got up, thanked the young soldier, and walked around the curve where Mohammad and the van were awaiting me.

We took off. The driver, M.'s friend, offered me a Guava. This wonderful hospitality, this generosity towards guests.

I was grateful, and moved. I bit into the tart delicious fruit.

We drove on a dirt road, passing villages with children with their school bags, the older ones holding the hands of the younger ones. From time to time a Minaret, this graceful structure on the top of a hill, delineated against a very blue sky. We passed sun-bleached rocks, and olive trees with thick ancient trunks - a sense of continuity and stability, rooted, I settled back into my seat. A sense of lightness washed over me, a serenity.

Thus began the journey that took me to Ramallah and Jenin, to Kfar Cara, Tuval, Tivon, and Jerusalem, where I met with former participants from the "Vacation from War". I met and spoke with each one of them individually.

One of the things I found so striking was the candid and forthright demeanor of these young people. The willingness to talk, to be challenged. Their curiosity and excitement in meeting the "others". Their resiliency and perseverance in face of sometimes excruciating confrontations. Fresh young faces, who will carry the future.

It was interesting to hear what motivated them to embark on this journey, what were their expectations. What were they hoping to find out, to achieve?

They spoke of the surprises, of some disappointments, the great moments of discovery, the most difficult times, what common grounds they found, and what issues were irreconcilable. They spoke about what was most important to them. How did they feel about each other, what have they learned from one another, the impact of opening up to a sometimes painful scrutiny. What did they take with them that was new. How did they feel after coming back home? What remained?

I am enclosing here a few quotes from my conversations with them that deals mainly with the conclusions at the end of the seminar.

- "When I went to Germany, I didn't expect to meet the Jews, but when I met them, I felt that they are good people, and that they are not on the side of their government."

- "What was great - I met some fantastic wonderful people. and the experiences we had there were fantastic as well."

- ["Vacation from War"] certainly brought a change in me, in the way I think, the way I perceive, the way I notice things, see things."

- "Q: What were the most difficult moments?"

"From the moment we had arrived till we left, throughout the whole time."

Q: What were the beautiful moments?

(After describing some very gruelling confrontations): "...but the moment we went outside, we were best friends. The discussions were fierce, painful, we had very different point of views, but outside the discussions we were best of friends. We formed really deep and real friendships. "

- "Everyone was moved to see that we started from a point that we are strangers. We drove from the airport, and in the bus one group sat in the front, and the other group sat in the back. In the first couple of days everyone felt so far from each other, like we could never be close, and we were really closed-off from one another. It was hard. They were angry with us. We could feel it very strongly. Then we started to talk about things. It became more human. We became such good friends, real, authentic, and that was amazing."

(Talking about a fierce exchange that dealt with irreconcilable issues, when some of the participants walked out): "[The counselors] were great. They knew what to do. They had calmed us down."

"Helga, I love Helga, She is my friend".

(Was said by everyone.)

"I think something good could come of this, to become humble".

"I know that on Television they're always showing the marching, the funerals. Thousands of people marching with Hamas, and I sit at home and I think these people want to kill me. It is just working on your fears. But if you know Palestinians, it is a whole different experience. If you know their names, it is a whole different story. - They should take all the Israelis and all the Palestinians into these seminars, so they could talk to one another."

- "At the end of the Seminar we had a party. It was so much fun to see Palestinians and Israelis dancing together."

Q: Did the Seminar made a difference to you?

- "Sure it made a difference. A big difference. Now, after the Seminar, I feel a responsibility about the situation. About what is going on in my country. Before, I was standing on the side, not understanding what's going on. Now I feel a responsibility."

- "I felt that I am speaking with my partners, partners for peace. Partners for a different way. At the beginning we didn't feel that. We felt that we are sitting and talking with our enemies. Afterward we felt that they are partners, they are with us. And I think that this was the most important moment, that they are partners, committed, with us, to something different, to a new way. "

- Did you make friends?

" Yes, we exchange E-mail with the Palestinians."

- " A few weeks ago we were invited by the Israelis to a Birthday party for one of the Israeli girls from the delegation. It was at a Haifa beach. We made it. (we found a way to cross over). It was so great. It was great to get together again, to see everybody. And it was fun, and wonderful. (The utter delight that radiated from their faces spoke even louder than their words.)

- "We are still in telephone contact. We even met a few weeks ago on the beach in Haifa. The whole Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli delegations came. Four Palestinian came too. It was very exciting. We run towards them from the Board-walk. Everyone looked at us. It was very moving. It was a great joy. We longed to see them. They became friends.

Q: What was the most important thing you carried with you from the Seminar?

- "I came out with a lot of love for the 'other side", especially understanding. Not absolut, not final, because there are still issues that I need to understand, things that are not right. I understood our side and their side in more depth. The most important discovery was the realization that they are not enemies, that they are partners. That we need to go with them, and not against them. This is the only way we will be able to find solutions."

I am deeply impressed by the impact of these meetings on the young participants.

My thanks to Helga, Mohammad, Bassem, Shulti and all the others for the wonderful work you have been doing.

Also striking is the love and gratitude for the Counselors from the former participants. From what I understood, there were some harrowing confrontations that inflicted great pain and rage, as it was bound to be. My admiration for the youngsters who were willing to go through these moments of "pergatory" and not succumb, and for the counselors who seemed to have handled these conflict with great sensitivity, wisdom and care. And finally, my thanks to Helga and her friends for creating "Vacation from War", where, through working out the conflicts, love prevails.

Hava Beller

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