

Vacation

from

War

Summer 2008

Steps toward the Concrete Utopia of a Peaceful World

Facilitator's Seminar reports

Avog + Hewar 2008

Compiled and commented by Helga Dieter

Avog (Alternative Voice in the Galilee - Israel) and Hewar (Centre for Development and Peace - Palestine) are grassroots-initiatives on both sides of the wall and our partner-organisations since many years. Olfat is the only Palestinian facilitator, who sent a report in the summer 2008.

In all the reports the extraordinary commitment and the professional quality of the facilitators can be perceived. All the colleagues in our grassroots initiative work on a voluntary base and just receive a pocket-money. Also various other matters concerning accomodation or the contents of our activities are different from other projects which are sponsored by public money or private foundations.

The time-table and structure of the contents is similar in all our groups. After two or three days full of work there is an excursion (sightseeing in cities, a boat trip, a walk, a visit to a museum or a memorial-place as well as a daytrip across an invisible border to Amsterdam, Strasbourg or Brussels).

Olfat , Palestinian facilitator

The group consisted of 27 Palestinians from the Westbank, 3 with Jerusalem ID and 3 with Israeli passports as well as 27 Jewish from Israel. A team of 3 Palestinians, 3 Jewish, 3 Palestinian translators with Israeli identity card and a Palestinian coordinator, a total of 70 persons.

Each group had 20 participants, 2 facilitators - 1 Israeli and 1 Palestinian - and a translator.

Activities: Ice breaking activities, warming up activities done by a specialized German team. The second day was filled with acquaintance, then talking about the personal narrative leading to the national narrative, leading to the importance of land for both sides, understanding the cause of the conflict. Lecture about Nachba, Holocaust, the role of the German team. At the end open dialogue about the effect of the wall, settlements, refugees, prisoners, finally negotiation and press conference.

Process: these young Palestinians decided to meet young Israelis despite the social difficulties, scepticism and risk of being called collaborators. They came to meet their enemy face to face to feel the equality between them, to feel that they are humans! Since in real life most of them have never met or talked to an Israeli. They just meet them on the check points or in their own occupied territories, when soldiers come savagely to arrest or assassinate a neighbor, a friend, or even a relative. Despite of all this they came to find a common ground to tell their stories, to stop their suffering, their misery, and even to show that they have the right to live freely in their own land.

Whereas the Israeli came to learn more about the history of the country, the depth of the Palestinians' problem which they are not aware of .During the dialogue the Israelis listened

carefully to the Palestinian narratives which again made them feel strong and biased, although they considered themselves to be left wing. The meeting gave them the chance to feel superior which they tried to hide, and not to show the others their real opinions, they got angry on the Palestinians who represented an inside mirror for them.

It became clear in the discussions that the Palestinians are united, they always gave each other the chance to talk about their suffering, to express their feelings. When one of them talks he or she represents the whole group, because all of them share the same conditions. They feel that the Palestinian case must not be divided into 67th, 48th Palestinians or Jerusalemites: "we are all Palestinians who live under occupation, so we should be united to end the occupation and to show our occupiers that we can work together easily ". That was one of the Palestinian sayings.

As a facilitator I say they try to find ways to show the Israeli group that despite the struggle outside between Hamas and Fatah it does not affect them in the dialogue room.

In the dialogue sessions the Palestinians feel in certain points that there is no need to talk; they reached a dead ended point. They are frustrated from what is going on! Suddenly they hear the change in the Israeli thoughts, signaling admission of guilt and accepting responsibility of what is going on with the Palestinians, admitting that all this is caused by them because they are the occupier of the Palestinians' land. This gives them hope to continue what they came for - to talk about the inner feelings that they have, the right to live peacefully, to stop humiliating them, to end their feeling of being crippled.

Very different voices arose asking for realizing this in different ways, like accepting to have two states in the borders of 1967. Other Israelis refused to take responsibility of what is going on, so they retreated to their religion saying that God promised to help.

When the lecture about the Nacba was given, some of the Israeli refused acceptance and expressed their anger. They refused to accept it, although it was written by an Israeli historian (Ilan Pappé), who showed up a different view that they had never thought of or heard of. For the first time a new Israeli voice condemns the deeds of the Israelis in the Nacba, and recognizes the Palestinians' right of return .

From the first day communication between Palestinians and Israelis could be seen as if there was no conflict or struggle, they lived peacefully and happily together. This tells us that the Palestinians wanted to show the Israelis that they are equal to them, they are well educated and civilized, they are "human". Or they wanted to find something in common that could turn their lives to the best, or they got bored of reporting about the suffering and the misery in their homeland. Here in Germany they wanted to live peacefully, to put aside their daily suffering, fear and agony, trying to escape from reality.

We could notice that the 48th participants felt lost because they were a minority and they needed a lot of effort to show to both sides (67 Palestinians and Israelis) that they are Arab Palestinians who live in the Israeli territories. And they wanted to show the Israelis that although they live in Israel and carry its passport, they still suffer.

In the press conference for the first time creative suggestions were said about the right to return and compensation of the refugees. For example, they suggested that 2000-3000 could come back and live in the Israeli territories and the others could have part of the Israeli land adding it to the Palestinians' areas. To the Palestinians who don't want to come back they should give a certain amount of money as compensation.

Since the beginning facilitators and translators worked hard to build up trust between the participants. At the end the participants had shared experiences, were able to understand their identity better and they even talked about what they could do when they went back home. That's

why we emphasize on making a follow up program to strengthen the personal relations of this group and to make their experiences meaningful.

Finally we would like to say thanks to the German team who was great, they organized everything excellently, provided the convenient facilities, helped in every way to pass the program successfully. Especially those who worked hard on preparing and financing the 15 days in camp. While others agreed to stop the dialogue with Palestinians, this project of the committee led by Helga Dieter did not surrender to despair and believed that without talking people will never be able to resolve the conflict. She did her best to gather money and find donors to make this project successful.

Shulti, Israeli Coordinator

The preparation process of the Jewish-Israeli group

Recruiting

The recruiting process began in March 08, the emphasis being on students and other young people between the ages of 22 and 30 years, with various social and political backgrounds. I have been helped by delegation participants from previous years. There was an effort to keep a gender balance and to assure the diversity of the participants' backgrounds.

The basic group was put together by the end of April, which was when the first meeting took place. Later on there were many changes, mainly due to the strike in the universities, which affected the time table for the final exams.

Preparative meetings

Six of these were held between May and August. The meetings helped to integrate the group. There were difficulties in reaching full participation because of the distances and everyday pressures.

The meetings focussed on:

- Initial introduction of the participants.
- Group integration and creating a commitment.
- Coordination and clarification of expectations.
- Study of narratives.
- Emotional preparation.
- Passing on of information and coordination.

The Meeting In Germany

The stages of work in groups.

My group and Olfat's with Ameen as translator

Group composed of: 9 Jews, 3 Palestinians – '48th, 8 Palestinians – '67th
12 men, 8 women.

The "breaking of the ice" at the beginning of the work created an easy atmosphere and willingness to take part by contributions. However it also distanced the participants somewhat from their original situation (on both sides of the fence) and even brought in a fear of expressing strong feelings towards the other, least they will lose the sense of "let's meet as people... let us not rock the boat..." this was evident in the 48th Palestinians, who at first didn't know which sub-group they belonged to, speaking alternatively Hebrew and Arabic. In my opinion it damaged the Palestinian group's ability to challenge the Jewish group at least in the first few days, in comparison with previous years.

Later on, following the presentation of the national narrative, things were clear, both, lack of trust and imbalances in the telling of the suffering and the feelings of injustice. The Israeli group tended to listen more, but the Palestinian group mainly voiced generalities, not backing them with personal examples. The process shifted between the effects of the occupation and the jumping to solutions.

Informal meetings and diversion outings.

Though our request to establish face to face talks with the unknown “other” is hardly ever responded, in an informal way, such meetings take place in the volleyball game, in the smokers’ group in the inner patio and during the outings after the activities. These encounters created conditions which enforced the dialogue and the group process to the point that a conscious decision was made to mix the sitting order. It was noticeable that the tone givers were the males of the Israeli group.

Extra-curriculum and evening activities

The lecture about the Nacba was important and brought up significant issues, but perhaps it should have been given by someone who was not involved in the group work. The reaction to the lecture from the Israeli point of view should be more encompassing. Helga Dieter’s lecture came from a German point of view, but it seems to me that it gave an answer to the Israelis’ need for balance. The Shiatsu sessions, though they may have helped individual participants to recover from their frustration, broke the continuity of the group. The evening activities of the Israeli and Palestinian groups were meaningful and united almost all of the participants.

The peace negotiations proved to be essential to the introduction of the reality aspect of our work and made people take a position, patriotic at first and more flexible, responsible and realistic later.

Conclusions

Hearing and reading the concluding remarks of many participants, as well as watching the difficulties they had when saying goodbye, one can see that the meeting succeeded in changing the participants’ views towards activities for peace. The seminar has contributed a lot to acquaintance the individuals of both sides with each other and with the situation, thus making the Israelis and maybe even the Palestinians aware of their own blindness previous to the meeting. This has deepened their involvement and made them want to continue meeting one another. Moreover, they have developed a motivation to do more together for a just peace in order to change the situation. We began planning other meetings, national and bi-national to follow up what happened to the participants since their return to their own people and to find meaningful joint projects.