

Pedagogy on Rubble

Emergency Pedagogy with War-Traumatized Children in Gaza

At the turn of the year 2008/2009 armed conflicts shocked the Gaza Strip. The three-week long fighting costed ca. 1,400 people their lives, including many children. Over 5,500 people were severely injured. 22,000 houses and almost the entire infrastructure of the Gaza Strip were destroyed. Since then 80 percent of the approximately 1.2 million residents have been living under the poverty line set by the UN, over half are children under 15 years of age. The Gaza Strip is as before under a blockade. Supplies are delivered mostly through the more than 2,000 illegal tunnels in the border region with Egypt.

The "Friends of Waldorf Education" were already in the Gaza Strip in the end of January for an emergency pedagogy crisis intervention, but their work had to be abandoned early due to the closing of the Egyptian border. It was now possible for a further emergency team made up of ten psychologists, pedagogues, and therapists¹ to travel to Gaza over the Israeli border crossing in Erez with help from the German Federal Foreign Office. They then resumed emergency pedagogy based on Waldorf pedagogy. They picked up their work, where it had to be abandoned in February: in the orphanage of Gaza-City.

Farrah Halami: "This child has no future!"

Many children in the Gaza Strip are no longer able to leave their apartments due to the severity of their injuries. Others are so heavily traumatized, that they hole themselves up in their apartments and react with panic attacks, when they should leave the house. And still others are simply hidden and locked away by their desperate parents, in succession of their psychopathological changes caused by trauma. Farrah, 2½ years old, lives with the survivors of her family in the remains of their burned down house in northern Gaza. On January 4th, 2009 phosphor missiles struck the apartment to which 16 family members fled seeking protection. Farrah's grandfather, Sadaka (45), and her brothers Adavahim (14), Zad (12), and Hamsa (9) burned to death. Her sister Shakes (1½) was being breastfed when she was killed by shock waves. Six other family members were severely injured in the attack. Farrah, together with her mother Rada (20), was transferred to a military hospital in Egypt. Attempts by the crisis team to visit the child there in February failed due to bureaucratic hurdles. Her mother succumbed to her injuries and Farrah is also marked by her severe phosphorus burns. Back in Gaza, her still "smoking wounds" were crudely sealed with silicone rags in a tent hospital. In addition to her severe physical injuries, come the no less severe psychic wounds. The once cheerful girl no longer plays since the terrifying event. She is socially withdrawn and suffers from eating and digestion disorders. Every evening she takes sleeping pills in order to be able to fall asleep but still wakes up at night screaming and drenched in sweat from nightmares. Farrah is totally fixated on her father Mohamed (24). She reacts to every separation with panic and helplessness. Her 45 year old grandmother Sabah Salama Al Suleima Abu Halami says with tears in her eyes at parting: "This child has no future!". Farrah urgently requires medical and psycho-therapeutic aid abroad – one case of many.

Work with children: "Why have you..."

Individual fates confront one everywhere in the Gaza Strip. Even months after the war catastrophe deep emotional wounds gape open, especially in the souls of children. About 50% of the over 500

children with whom the pedagogical emergency team worked showed clear symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. In a summer camp for children in the heavily damaged city district of Jabaliya the team meets a group of about 60 children. Most show behavioural disturbances. Many try to coerce attention through aggressive disruptions, fight for the stability and orientation offering hand of the carers in circle games, or over a shred of modelling wax. Others withdraw from the group with an almost depressive paralysis. With movement exercises in the circle, an attempt is made to work playfully on often recognizable rhythm disorders, lack of concentration, and on movement disorders (hyperactivity or reluctance to move). Because the shock, as the popular saying goes, often sticks in the limbs, every kind of movement which dissolves inner blockades and paralysis is of special importance. Similar symptoms can also be observed in children and adolescents at the Al Amal Institute and Orphanage in Gaza-City. It is impossible for many to speak about their traumatic experiences. Therefore it is attempted, using music, drawing, painting, sculpting, movement, and role playing games, to provide creative means of expression. These children too need security and orientation giving rituals, in order to counter destruction of boundaries caused by war experiences and to help them to a new awareness of rules. About 20 children participated in a "sleeping beauty game" in deep inwardness. The facial expressions of the children began to slowly ease; their gaze began to open. It was as if a thaw would occur after a psychological ice age with little sun beams. Also in Salatine, a tent city for the homeless in northern Gaza, word about the work of the emergency team spreads like wildfire. Within a short time, over 120 children and many mothers have come together. Life in the camp is miserable. A charity organises a warm lunch three times a week. In addition to the external misery, comes the internal. Ranin, a nine-year old girl, saw how on the third day of the war a rocket impacted a group of people and killed many of them. She was with her family, fleeing to relatives in Jabaliya. Since then her life has changed dramatically. Nightmares rob her of sleep, she screams every night, she wets herself again, and swings herself aggressively around. "We had houses, now we live in tents. No one cares for us. What can this girl do, that she now must live without hope for a future in a tent!", Mohammed Zaid, a bombed-out farmer from northern Gaza tells us.

Senat El Samouni is 37 years old. We meet the completely destitute women with two of her six surviving children in a ruin in Zeitoun, a south-eastern city district of Gaza-City. Zenab El Samouni reports that her husband left their house on orders from the Israeli military and was shot by soldiers in front of the door. "We couldn't bring him to the hospital due to the Israeli blockade. He died in front of the house and had to stay there for 18 days.² I was alone with 15 children in the house. When the soldiers invaded the house, I had to keep the frightened, screaming children together. During the raid soldiers shot my four-year old son Ahmet dead!" Zenab El Samouni showed us photos of child corpses and pointed to the blood spatter on the room's walls.

...destroyed our childhood?"

In the rubble of Zeitoun live survivors of the Samouni-Clan, an over 100 person family of rural origin. Most of their homes were destroyed by missile attacks. 36 family members, including many children, died. For four days rescue workers of the Red Crescent were prevented from helping the shaken and injured. Already during the first emergency pedagogy crisis intervention in February 2009, the pedagogical-therapeutic care of the children of the Samouni-Clan was a focus of the work.

The reunion was shocking. The five-year old Islam, whose father and mother died in an attack, has since suffered from panic attacks, nightmares, night-time cold sweats, sleep disorders, social

withdrawal, and burning eye allergies. His 15-year old brother Helmi tells softly crying, how after the detonation of a rocket, the separated head of his father fell into his lap. He suffers from the painful effects of a failed emergency operation, which was necessary due to a splinter wound on his abdomen. The doctors couldn't give him any hope for an improvement. Issa, 8 years old, who lost his parents and siblings, panhandles and repeats the same phrases over and over again. Almost all of the children of the Samouni-Clan suffer from the emotional effects of their terrible war experiences. The monstrosity trauma eats up their souls.

The scene is bizarre. In the middle of a huge field of rubble stands a 300m² large tent constructed by us, which should protect from the glowing sun. Inside, around 120 children walk rhythmically in a circle. Games from experiential pedagogy and circus pedagogy are on the agenda. Not so far away, an art studio has opened up in a former small storage room. A pressing closeness and hustle and bustle dominate during water-colouring painting and form drawing. Next door in the ruins of a destroyed house, on whose walls blood from the murdered four-year old Ahmet sticks, eurhythmics is being practiced with a group of children. Under the shadow of a small tree in front of one of three still standing houses, kindergarten games are being played with pre-school children. There are dancing, arts-and-crafts, and music-making. Somewhat farther away in a dugout next to a sick donkey, the 12-year old, severely traumatised Mahmoud is being cared for with emergency pedagogy. "Soldiers in tanks shot at us with smoke. My sister lay injured on the street. Two helicopters circled around her. Many fled. At the gas station laid many dead people. My sister's son is dead, her husband is dead, and another of my sister's sons is injured. I dream every night about blood and death. I can no longer concentrate at school!". Mahmoud has been stricken by especially brutal images.

We meet Shaban and Issa again, who in the room where their family died and Israeli soldiers, according to the family, left behind ugly graffiti, excitedly practiced eurhythmics with us. Almesa and Zenab too, both 13-year old girls, immediately recognize us again. By her own account, Almesa clung to her dead parents for four days under debris. She told us, how she desperately tried to scare away bugs which began to eat the corpses. Both girls seem to have "forcefully" matured since then. They participated enthusiastically in painting. When Almesa finished her painting, the subtitle read: "Why have you destroyed our childhood!".

The work with parents: "I encounter my dead children again and again on the street!"

Trauma is infectious. Children, who have not directly experienced a traumatic event, can be infected by the traumatization of their parents. One speaks then of a "secondary traumatization". The 60 year old mother of seven Mohammadeya El Samouni, tell us about trauma caused by the death of two of her children, in connection with parenting problems: "I was with the rest of my family fleeing to Gaza-City and didn't see my two children dying. I dream repeatedly about my dead children and simply cannot believe that they are dead. I also see them in real life. I encounter my dead children again and again on the street!"

Children often show psychosomatic reactions and behavioural problems as a result of psycho-traumatic experiences. These reactions and behaviours pose a pedagogical challenge to parents and caregivers. "My children always become afraid at night. They cry, scream, and wet the bed. My seven-year old daughter is afraid of everything that moves since the war!" reports the 24 year old Rana Zayed, mother of three children. "All of the children are afraid, especially when airplanes come!", added Ebtessam Talmes, 42 year old mother of 10. And the 35 year old Somaya El Sultan,

mother of six, commented: "My three year old son even fears birds. He always wants to sleep!" We hear similar reports of traumatic reactions and symptoms during our discussions in the Gaza Strip in many variations. "Many of our children quarrel uninterrupted. They are aggressive, are becoming increasingly disruptive, and no longer accept any rules!", complained Sahar Samouni, 37 years old, mother of ten, and added: "But also the adults are stressed and aggressive. They lose their patience very quickly!" Other parents reported that their children suddenly no longer follow their instructions and would even hit them. Many parents are desperate, and no longer understand the behaviour of their children and they believe their only remaining option is to physical punish their children, what though certainly will not contribute to the healing and health of their children. Also reports of regressive and self-injuring behaviour of children are ubiquitous. Somaya El Sultan from Salatine tells us: "Just four months before the war I had weened my child from breast-feeding. During the bombings he again wanted to breast-feed. He wouldn't stop crying until he was breast feed. Still today he screams, when I refuse to breast feed him. He screams again and again, "we are next!". Another mother reports that her four year old son bites his thumb until it bleeds.

These parenting difficulties in dealing with psycho-traumatic symptoms are great and make parental advising absolutely essential. Therefore the pedagogical emergency team organised well attended office hours for parental advising in Zeitoun and Salatine. In separate men's and women's discussion groups, the anxious questions of the parents were received and culturally-sensitive pedagogical solution approaches were sought. Here, the aspects love, attentive care and sense of safety, rhythm and ritualization (daily structure, eating, sleeping), movement and play (ball games, rope games, swinging, circle games), artistic activities (painting, drawing, kneading, arts-and-crafts), physical contact (embrocation, massages), and caring for spiritual-religious feelings played a central role. It was also important to show the parents crisis techniques, which they could use to try to interrupt panic attacks or forced remembering (flashbacks), when they occur in their children. These techniques include breathing exercises and eye movements. These tips are stabilising emergency measures, provided because true professional treatment possibilities are almost entirely absent.

Courses for Pedagogues and Therapists: "This pedagogy strengthens"

At the urgent request of our cooperation partner in the Gaza Strip, the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, the emergency team of the "Friends of Waldorf Education" staged a four day continuing education course for pedagogues and therapists in the Al Qattan Centre in Gaza-City. The course was excitedly attended by about 100 participants. After the opening ceremony, lectures were held daily about developmental-pedagogical problems in a psycho-traumatic context.

In addition to general questions about psychotraumatology and emergency pedagogy, the courses were above all about child development in the first and second septennial and developmental disorders with respect to traumatic experiences. Practical work groups followed in eurhythmy, painting and form drawing, experiential pedagogy, sand play therapy, and children's games for pre-school aged children. Daily communal closing circles with rhythmic movement exercises and collective singing rounded off the courses. On the last day, the results of the "workshops" were presented in plenum and the training programme was closed with a question and discussion session. A participant summarised the result of the programme as such: "This pedagogy strengthens!".

Future Perspectives: "Please return"

In an evaluation discussion on the last work day, a first analysis of the pedagogical emergency mission took place together with the directors of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme. The director of the psychology department, Hasan Shaban Zeyada thanked the emergency team for their dedicated work with the affected children and parents as well as for the many creative impulses presented in the continuing education courses: "Many experts have already come to Gaza and have passed on theories. But you have convinced us with your practical work. We are exhausted from the continuous trauma work and have become blinded by routine. We need your view from the outside and your creative impulses. Please don't leave us alone! Please return!"

In light of the unimaginable extent of emotional suffering as a result of the armed conflicts in the Gaza Strip, the "Friends of Waldorf Education" must reflect the consequences and further perspectives after the reappraisal of the second emergency mission. Perhaps a conception can be developed in cooperation with the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme and other partners. This conception could offer perspectives above and beyond emergency pedagogy acute aid and the chance for a Waldorf pedagogy establishment aid. And then remain many concrete individual fates, whose need requires creative solutions: the 2½ year, phosphorus-burned Farrah, whose grandmother sees no hope for her future, the five-year old Mohammed, whose right arm was destroyed by a splinter from rocket-propelled grenade, and for whom a follow-up operation could prevent the need for an arm amputation, the six year old Karam Nedal Awad, who cannot coordinate his movements and who desperately needs long-term therapy, or the 43-year old desolate Mazen, whose cervical spine was injured by a bullet which damaged her spinal cord, and to whom a German University Clinic in Berlin offered treatment for 154,00 Euros paid in advanced. Concrete people with concrete need. Will their cries for help be heard?

Joy heals

What remains? What can we achieve? The anthroposophic understanding of man based on Waldorf pedagogy fulfils all the criteria which are necessary for a stabilising pedagogical effect on children after extreme experiences, and stimulates their self-healing powers. Even if all pedagogical intervention had no effect, still the unforgettable moments would remain, where children found their way back to language through human affection, where children's eyes began to shine again, or the "frozen" faces of children thawed again and returned to life.

Such joyful moment increase the readiness of the organism to heal. There are studies done at the University of Pittsburgh which show that there is a connection between the stress level of a person and the likelihood that they will catch a cold. Stress, rage, anger, or negative memories trigger chaotic heart rhythms for a few minutes, which then weaken the immune system for about six hours. The immunoglobulins, which are constantly being newly formed in the mucous membranes and protect from infections there, decrease considerably after stress, what then weakens the organism's resistance to infections. Therefore everyone has a significantly increased risk of infection after a traumatic experience. Conversely joy, experiencing empathy, and positive memories promote the cohesion of heart rhythms and also an increase in the production of immunoglobulins and therefore an increase in resistance to infections. Joy stimulates self-healing powers, joy heals! The interventions based on Waldorf-pedagogical emergency pedagogy build on such connections and knowledge from an anthroposophic understanding of the human being. Expanding these interventions to help people in extreme emergency situations effectively will be a task for the coming years.

Bernd Ruf

Annotations [1] The crisis intervention team of the “Friends of Waldorf Education” included: Manfred Hartmann (pedagogue), Friedgard Kniebe (early childhood pedagogue), Peter Lang (diploma pedagogue), Lukas Mall (experiential pedagogue), Kristina Manz (assistant), Bernhard Merzenich (special needs educator and eurythmist), Yoko Miwa (psychologist), Bernd Ruf (special education teacher and mission leader), Anni Sauerland (experiential pedagogue), Heidi Wolf (art therapist), Yehia Hassouna (interpreter). [2] This statement was reconfirmed, after our sceptical inquiry. Also other witnesses confirmed that during the occupation period no dead were allowed to be buried. [3] cf. Servan-Schreiber, David (2006 10): Die neue Medizin der Emotionen. München. S.78ff.