

PEDAGOGY ON RUINS

Emergency Pedagogy with war traumatised children in Gaza.

With the change of year 2008/09 Gaza was devastated by war. Military action lasted three weeks long and about 1400 lives lost many of which were children. Gaza's more than 5500 people suffered severe injuries. With 22 000 homes and almost its entire infrastructure destroyed. 80 percent of the 1.2 million inhabitants have since then been living below the poverty line more than half of these are children under the age of 15. Gaza still has a blockade imposed on it. Supplies are largely gotten through the more than 2000 illegal tunnels in the border areas to Egypt.

"The Friends of Waldorf Education" have been working with war traumatised children in Gaza since the end of January, but had to stop their work ahead of time because of the closure of the Egyptian border. At the end of July they succeeded in the continuation of their mission. An emergency team of ten psychologist, educators and therapists[1], with the help of the department of foreign affairs were now, once again able to get to Gaza via the Israeli border of Erez and continue their emergency pedagogical work on the basis of Waldorf education. The work was continued there, where it was stopped in February: in an orphanage in Gaza city.

Farrah Halami: "This child has no future!"

Because of severe injuries many children in Gaza are unable to leave their homes. Others are so traumatised, they react with panic attacks when having to leave their homes, or are being hidden and locked up by desperate parents. Two and a half year old Farrah lives with the surviving members of her family in what is left of their missile destroyed home in northern Gaza. On January 4th her house was struck by a phosphor missile, where 16 members of her family fled to for safety. Farrah's grandfather, Sadaka (45), her brothers Adavahim(14) and Hamsa (9) were incinerated. Her sister Shakes (1½), who was breastfeeding at the time, was torn to death by the blast. 6 other family members were severely wounded by the attack. Farrah and her mother Rada (20) were brought to a military hospital in Egypt. Attempts made by our emergency team to visit her in February failed due to bureaucratic hurdles. Her mother succumbed to her internal injuries and Farrah is scarred by severe phosphor burns. In Gaza her "smoking wounds" are still being treated provisionally getting covered with silicon bandages in a tent hospital.

Added to the severe physical wounds are the no less severe mental scars. Since this devastating event this once cheerful little girl no longer plays. She is socially withdrawn and suffers from severe eating - and digestion disorders. Every evening she has to be given sleeping tablets in order to sleep, she still wakes nights screaming in cold sweat. Farrah is completely fixated on her 24 year old father Mohamed. Any kind of separation from him leaves her completely helpless and panicky. Her 45 year old grandmother with tear filled eyes said to us upon departure "*this child has no future!*" Farrah is desperately in need of medical and psychotherapeutic help from abroad - only one case of many others.

Working with children: "Why did you..."

Cases like Farrah's can be found everywhere along the Gaza strip. Even months after the catastrophe of war, deep psychological wounds show itself in the souls of the children. About 50% of the more

than 500 children that the emergency Pedagogy team has been working with are clearly showing signs of post traumatic disorders.

In the severely damaged district of Jabaliya the team met with a group of about 60 children in a summer camp. Most of them show signs of behavioural disorders. Many try to get attention through force with aggressive disruptions; they fight to hold - the orientation giving hand of their care takers in circle games or snatch at beeswax. Others withdraw with an almost depressive paralysis from the group. With movement exercises in a circle attempts are made to work in a therapeutic playful manner. As "fright makes the limbs tight" any form of movement can be meaningful in loosening inner blockages and paralysis.

Similar symptoms were also present in children and youths in the Al Amal institute for orphans in Gaza city. Many are not able to speak of their traumatic experiences. Thus creative means are explored to create a space for them where they can express their trauma through music, drawing and painting, wax modelling, movement and role play. These children too need secure and orientation supportive rituals, to counteract the disorientation which occurred because of the war to help them find a new awareness for rules. About 20 children participated with deep inwardness in the play "sleeping beauty". Slowly but surely their facial expression and gaze started to be less cramped. It was as if, after an ice age in their emotions some sunrays made the first thawing possible.

In Salatine a city of tents for the homeless in Northern Gaza, the work of our emergency team ran through like a wild fire. In no time at all we had about 120 children and many mothers together. Life here in this camp is miserable. A foundation has organised a warm meal three times a week. Along with this external need there is the inner one. Ranin a nine year old girl saw how a missile hit a group of people and killed many of them. She and her family were fleeing to relatives in Jabaliya. Since then her life has changed nightmares have been robbing her of sleep, she wets her bed and aggressively hits out. *"We used to have homes now we live in tents, nobody cares about us. Why does this girl have to pay, living here in a tent with a hopeless future?"* Mohammed Zaid a farmer from northern Gaza bombed out of his home asked.

Zenab El Samouni is 37 years old. We met this destitute woman with two of her six surviving children on the ruins of **Zeitoun**, in south eastern Gaza-city. Zenab El Samouni reported how the Israeli military summoned her husband to leave their house and was then shot down by soldiers in the doorway. "Because of the Israeli blockade we were not able to bring him to hospital. He died outside of our house and was left lying there for 18 days.[2] I was home alone with 15 children. The soldiers entered our house and I had to try and keep the frightened, screaming children calm. When they stormed the house they shot down my 4 year old son Ahmet!" Zenab El Samouni showed us a picture of the child's dead body and the blood trail on the walls.

...destroy our childhood?"

Among the ruins of Zeitoun there live the surviving members of the Samouni clan, a farming family with more than 100 members. Their homes were largely destroyed by missile attacks. 36 Family members many of which were children died. The red half moon rescue units were denied access to help the injured and those buried in the ruins. During the first emergency pedagogical crisis intervention in February 2009 the pedagogical therapeutic work with the children of the Samouni clan already presented the team with a special focus.

The renewed meeting with them was shocking. The 5 year old Islam, whose parents died in the attack, suffers from panic attacks, nightmares, and cold sweats at night, sleeping disorders, social apa-

thy, burning allergies in his eyes. His 15 year old brother Helmi silently crying tells, how after the missile detonated, his father's decapitated head landed in his lap. He is suffering the consequences of a failed emergency operation attempt that was needed because of severe injuries to his stomach. The doctors have no hope of him improving. Issa is 8 years old and lost her parents and siblings, have been begging from all people since and speaks stereotypically the same thing over and over again. Almost all children of the Samouni clan are suffering from the emotional consequences of this terrible war. This immense trauma is eating away at their emotional life.

The scenery is bizarre. We erected a 300m² tent amidst the ruins, which serves as protection against the burning sun. About 120 rhythmical stepping children enter it going into a circle. Experience based learning games and circus acts is what the programme offers. Nearby in a former store room the art gallery has opened, it is overcrowded and aquarelle painting and form drawing is taken on with arduous drive. Next door in a ruined house where the blood trail of the 4 year old Ahmet is still to be seen on the wall, a group of children are practicing Eurythmy. In the shaded area of a small tree in front of one of the three remaining houses kindergarden games are being played with young pre-school children. Dancing, crafts and music are at the order of the day.

Somewhat further a field underneath a shelter where a sick donkey is standing the severely traumatised 12 year old Mahmoud is getting emergency psychological counselling. *"Soldiers in armoured vehicles shot smoke at us. My sister was lying in the street with her injuries. Two helicopters were circling over her. Many fled. At the petrol station many dead people were lying around. My sister's son is dead, her husband is dead, and another son of my sister is injured. Every night I dream of blood and death. I am no longer able to concentrate at school!."* Because of these particularly brutal pictures Mahmoud attracts attention.

We once again met up with Shaban and Issa who enthusiastically participate in the Eurythmy lesson, the walls of the room in which their family died was smeared with degrading messages by Israeli soldiers. The two 13 year old girls Almesa and Zenab recognised us immediately. Almesa told of how she clung to her dead parents covered in debris 4 days long. She tells of her desperate attempts to keep their corpses free from the vermin that started to devour it. Both girls seem to have "forcibly" grown up since we last saw them. They were very involved in the painting lesson. After Almesa completed her painting she titled it: *"Why have you destroyed our childhood!"*

Working with parents: "again and again I meet my dead children on the streets!"

Trauma is contagious. Children who have had no direct contact with traumatic events could be infected by the traumatic experiences the parents may have experienced. One then speaks of "secondary trauma". Mohammedeya El Samouni a 60 year old, mother seven tells of her own trauma caused by the death of her two children in relation to pedagogical problems: *I and the rest of my family were fleeing to Gaza city and I did not see my children die. I constantly dream of my dead children and simply cannot believe that they are dead. I see them everywhere in real life. Again and again I meet my dead children on the streets!"*

As a result of psychosomatic experiences children often show signs of reactionary behaviour or behavioural symptoms that present real pedagogical challenges for parents and teachers. *"At night my children are always anxious. They cry and wet their beds. Since the war my seven year old daughter fears anything that moves!"* a mother of three children 24 year old Rana Zayed reports. *"All children are in fear, particularly when aeroplanes fly by!"* Ebtessam Talmes a 42 year old mother of ten children adds. The 35 year old mother of six children Somaya El Sultan adds: *"my three year old son even has a fear of birds" He constantly wants to sleep!"*

Similar reports of traumatic reactions and behavioural symptoms in different variations met us in many conversations we had all along the Gaza stripe. "Many of our children have constant fights. They are aggressive, becoming more and more stubborn and don't accept rules anymore!" The 37 year old Sahar Samouni mother of 10 children complains and adds: *"But even the adults are aggressive and stressed. They are impatient and easily lose control!"* Other parents report that suddenly their children don't follow orders any longer some even hit out at them. The parents are confused, don't understand the behaviour of their children any longer and knows no other way to deal with their children other than by hitting as a punishment, which certainly doesn't help in the healing of the children.

Reports of regressive behaviour or self induced injuries of children are ever present. Somaya El Sultan from Salatine tells: *"four months before the war started I stopped breast feeding my three year old son. During the bomb attacks he demanded the breast and only stopped screaming after I gave in to his demand. Even now after the attacks he still screams for the breast. He continually screams: we are next to go!"* Another mother reports of her four year old son who bites at his thumb joints until it bleeds.

The pedagogical need in dealing with psychological traumatic symptoms is great and there is no getting around the necessity of parental counselling. Therefore the emergency team in Zeitoun and Salatine made consultations available for parent counselling. Divided into male and female discussion groups the parents concerns were heard and pedagogical resolutions were looked at in the frame of the cultural context. Aspects such as love, attention and the feeling of security, rhythm and rituals (daily routines of eating and sleeping), movement and play (ball games, skipping rope activities swinging and circle games), artistic activities (painting, drawing, clay modelling, crafts), physical contact (body rub, massage) and the care of spiritual religious feelings take a central focus. It was also important to show the parents emergency techniques to help them with their children in cases of appearing panic attacks through breathing techniques and memory flashbacks by trying to interrupt the eye motions. These suggestions are only emergency stabilising measures in the face of mostly absent professional help.

Courses for teachers and therapists: *"This Pedagogy gives strength"*

Upon the request and an urgent plea of our cooperation partners the Gaza community mental health programme, the emergency team of "The Friends of Waldorf Education" held a four day training course for teachers and therapists in the Al Qattan centre in Gaza city, which was attended by about 100 inspired participants. After the opening talk there was daily presentation on developing pedagogical questions in the context of psychological trauma, especially focussing on child development in the first and second seven year cycles and the development disorders that arise in the face of trauma. This was followed by practical work groups in Eurythmy, painting, form drawing, outdoor education, playing with sand therapy and the preschool child at play. The groups then all joined for daily closure with rhythmical movement exercises and communal singing.

On the last day of the course there was a plenum session to present the results of the "workshops" with questions and answers on the training programme.

One participant made a fitting statement that showed the results of this training: *"This Pedagogy gives strength!"*

Future perspectives: “Please do come again”

In evaluations talks on our last working day we reviewed our work with the directors of the Gaza community health programme. The head of the psychological department Hasan Shaban Zeyada thanked the emergency team for their committed work with the children and parents, as well as the many creative suggestions in the training courses: *“Many experts have come to Gaza to give theories. You have convinced us through your practical work. We have become tired and professionally blind because of our uninterrupted trauma work. We need an outside view and your creative indications. Please do not leave us alone. Do come again!”*

In the face of this unimaginable magnitude in pain of soul as a result of the war in Gaza “The Friends of Waldorf Education” must after processing and reviewing our second emergency input, consider the consequences and future perspectives. Maybe concepts will develop that provide perspectives beyond emergency Pedagogy for a reconstructive Waldorf education.

And then there still remain the concrete individual destinies whose individual afflictions are crying out for creative solutions: the 2½ year old Farrah who is scarred by phosphorous burns, whose grandmother sees no future for her, the 5 year old Mohammed whose right arm was crushed by a splint from a rocket propelled grenade and could be saved from amputation by a second qualified operation, the 6 year old Karam Nedal Awad who is not able to coordinate his movements and is in urgent need of long term therapy, or the 43 year old destitute Mazen whose cervical spine was injured by a bullet as well as injuring his spinal cord who received an offer for treatment in Berlin costing 154.000 euro paid for upfront by a German clinic. These are real people with real needs. Will their cry for help be heard?

Joy heals

What remains? What can we offer? Waldorf education based on the anthroposophical picture of a human being fulfils all the criteria for a stabilising pedagogical effect and unfolding the self healing forces needed by children after extreme experiences. And even when all pedagogical measures have failed there still remain the unforgettable moments where children find their speech again through the loving attention given them from human contact, where children begin to radiate or the frozen facial expression begins to melt and come back to life again.

Such joyful moments increases the mobility of an organism to healing. Studies at the University of Pittsburgh[3], shows the connection between a person’s stress level and the predictable likeliness of getting a cold. Stress, anger, aggravation or negative memories trigger chaotic cardio rhythms for some moments resulting in the immune system being weekend for about six hours. The immune globulin which is constantly renewing itself in the mucus membranes and protects against infections, drops considerably when in stress, thus weakening the resistance of the organism. Therefore all who have had a traumatic experience has an increased risk of infections. In reverse joy, empathic experiences and positive memories results in cardio coherence as well as the increased production of immune globulin as a result a marked increase in resistance. Joy activates the bodies own self healing powers. Joy heals!

Such insights and knowledge of the human being are the basis for methods used in Waldorf Pedagogys emergency work. To expand it effectively for the good of people in extreme crisis situations will be our task over the next years.

Bernd Ruf

Notes

[1] In the crisis intervention team of “The friends of Waldorf education” were: Manfred Hartmann (teacher), Friedgard Kniebe (teacher of young children), Peter Lang (teacher), Lukas Mall (teacher), Kristina Manz (assistant), Bernhard Merzenich (remedial teacher and eurythmist), Yoko Miwa (Psychologist), Bernd Ruf (special education and team leader), Anni Sauerland (teacher), Heidi Wolf (art therapist), Yehia Hassouna (translator).

[2] In disbelief we enquired and this account was confirmed. Other witnesses also confirmed that during the time of occupation non of the dead were buried.

[3] cf. Servan-Schreiber, David (2006 ¹⁰): The new medicine of emotion. Munich. p.78ff.