

# FERIEN VOM KRIEG

DIALOGUES  
ACROSS BORDERS



## AUTUMN BULLETIN 2022

Dear supporters,

after two years of restrictions to our work induced by the pandemic, we are all the more pleased that this year, finally numerous cross-border workshops, seminars and camps could take place. Vacation From War has survived the peak of the pandemic – we owe this to the creativity and flexibility of our partners, but also to your loyal support as donors - a heartfelt thank you for this!

At the beginning of July, about 35 activists of the organization Seekers\* (name changed) met in Greece for the final spurt of their evaluation and strategy process. Most of them were active members of different generations of participants of the organization's programs, but also former and current team and board members took part in the seminar. The 10-day seminar was the culmination of the evaluation process which began back in 2021 and took longer than planned due to the pandemic. It was preceded by an evaluation of the work through digital questionnaires, individual and group interviews, and joint preparatory workshops in Palestine and Israel. From August 1st – 14th, 25 courageous women from Israel and Palestine met

near Cologne for intensive, stirring and mostly difficult dialogues about the conflict and the occupation.

The preparatory phase for the participants had not been easy due to the political situation, the fear of repression and the increasingly dominant discourse of normalization, but also due to COVID-related visa restrictions, especially on the Palestinian side. During the seminar, then, it became apparent how strongly the local political events of the last two years influenced the attitudes and perspectives of the participants and this changed the dynamics of the seminar.

Also in the former Yugoslavia, various activities took place: From July 24th - August 2nd, the annual Peace Camp for Youth happened in Seget Donji in Croatia. Over 60 young people from Tuzla,

Srebrenica, Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje, Brčko, Sombor and Vukovar discussed the wars and their impact on the present in a variety of workshops and reflected together on how to stand up for real peace and against nationalism in their hometowns.

In mid-August, 54 activists from the Youth United in Peace network met for an 8-day peace camp in Vukovar to delve deeper into peace activism and strengthen their cross-border collaboration. Before the pandemic, our Croatian partners from the organization "Our House Europe" had applied for EU funds, which covered a large part of the costs of the camp. This makes it possible to realize additional activities funded by Vacation From War this year.

## NEW BANK ACCOUNT

Our donations account has moved to the Bank für Sozialwirtschaft in 2021. At the end of this year, we will close the old account at Volksbank Odenwald. We kindly ask you to transfer future donations exclusively to the account at the Bank für Sozialwirtschaft (account info on the final page of this Bulletin) and to change standing orders accordingly. If you would like to support us on a regular basis, this is also possible through SEPA direct debit - simply use the [donation form on our website](#) or fill out [the enclosed form](#). Thank you!

## “A FEELING DEEP INSIDE TOLD ME THAT THERE IS NO REASON FOR HATRED”

(Text: B. Klass) Erna and Lejla came to the Peace Camp in Seget Donji from Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje, a small town in the mountains of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Croats and Bosnian Muslims lived together before the war.

During the war, there were fierce battles between Croatian and Muslim inhabitants, one of the town's streets became a demarcation line, and some of the town's inhabitants shot into each other's windows. Even today, many residents still know who killed whom during the war. The hatred marking the town, residue of the war, is therefore very personal. Since the end of the war, the city has been divided by an invisible borderline along the aforementioned street; Muslim Bosnians live in Vakuf, Croats in Uskoplje. For a long time, contact between people of the two ethnic identities was taboo, schools were strictly segregated, and students were not even allowed to meet in the schoolyard.

Such rules have since been loosened somewhat, but it is no coincidence that Erna was able to meet “the great girls from my town” only at a YU-Peace Camp. Society still puts pressure on youngsters in the town who do not want to let their lives be determined by the past anymo-

re; many therefore leave Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje. Nevertheless, every year young people come to our encounters, taking the opportunity to get to know each other and are determined to someday overcome nationalism and live together in peace.

In what follows, Erna and Lejla share their experiences at the encounter against the backdrop of growing up and living in a divided city.

“I have to admit that I was very doubtful before leaving for camp. Casual interactions with other people don't come easily to me, and I didn't know what to expect. But as soon as I arrived, I realized that I had nothing to worry about. All the people, the other participants, the organizers and the hotel staff were really great. I often don't dare to speak in public, but through the workshops and the conversations I took courage and the organizers were there to support and advise us every step of the way.

At this Peace Camp, I experienced something that I don't know from my city: the feeling of being part of a community. I realized that we all face the same problems, even if we name them differently. And that encouraged me to try to take at least small steps towards togetherness also in my city, so that not only I myself,

but also future generations can experience this wonderful feeling.

I always say that we are still at war. We don't have planes, tanks and trucks anymore, but we are part of the war between love and hate and this camp was another battle that love has won. (...) In the days after I came home I couldn't stop telling everyone about it, about the workshops and how sad it was that I didn't get to meet the great girls from my town until I was there. I am so grateful that the camp brought us together. Cheers for love.” (Erna Džambo)

“My feelings during the Peace Camp are hard to put into words. I still can't believe that I was lucky enough to become part of this story and I hope to continue writing it.

I am grateful for the knowledge I gained, it changed my views, especially about the people who fought against my people in the war. Actually, I had no real 'opinion' about them at all before, because I only ever heard bad things about them, while a feeling deep inside told me there was no reason for hatred. Because what happened in the past should stay there. But in my environment, where many believe that Croats and Bosnians should not mix, I had doubts about my feeling that we should all live together in the future.

This encounter showed me that my feeling was right and there are more people than I thought who feel the same. I am glad that every year this camp puts young people on the right path, the path to peace.

I hope this will continue until there is no more need to overcome prejudices because we all live together in peace. And also, the word 'nationalism' will be only a part of the past that we have overcome.” (Lejla Redžebašić)

Participants from Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje present the positive and problematic aspects of their city.



## WHAT'S NEXT? - LEARNING FROM MANY YEARS OF FOSTERING DIALOGUE IN PALESTINE AND ISRAEL...

In addition to a joint analysis of the changed political situation, the main focus during the evaluation seminar of our partner organization Seekers\* was on reflecting upon the organization's work to date and drawing conclusions for the future.

Fundamental questions such as the value and potential of bi-national dialogue in general in the current political context, as well as more specific methodological aspects such as the work in two-year program cycles were part of the discussion.

But also, concrete methods in the dialogue process, for example writing letters to the other side or creating a joint publication as a result of media-pedagogical work, were scrutinized and re-evaluated. Fundamentally, media and theater pedagogical methods clearly proved their worth for the dialogue work. It also became clear that it greatly helps the dialogue process as well as the group dynamic if, beyond personal insights and inner change processes which are at the core of the work, also a more "tangible" joint result emerges – be it joint theater performances or a jointly created online blog.

Abdi\* (name changed) from Nablus, who is now 24 years old and has been participating in Seekers\*'s programs since 2011, also sees potential for change in the composition of the participant groups: "I think the 'right-wing' side of Israeli socie-



Closing circle at the end of a long day of intense discussions

ty should also be represented in the programs, not just the 'left-wing'. (...) We must also learn to understand this part of society, (...) they don't understand us and we don't understand them, it would be very important to me that they were also present in Seekers\* (...) They are not present on the Palestinian side either. Maybe it would be better to have all opinions present from both sides." With these reflections, Abdi\* points to one of the fundamental challenges of political dialogue in the Palestinian-Israeli context (and not only there), namely the question of who organizations like Seekers\* reach in the first place and what this means for the impact of their work.

Overall, participants were very appreciative of the process: "I think there's a big gap in terms of evaluation with a lot of organizations. But Seekers\* does it regularly. However, this is the first evaluation process that looks so comprehensive-

ly at so many years of work. It's very exciting and I came because I think I can contribute to it in a productive way," said Or from Tel Aviv, who has been regularly facilitating dialogue groups at Seekers\* since 2015. Another reason Abdi\* cares so much about the evaluation process is him strongly believing in the work of Seekers\*: "Seekers\* is like my second home. (...) I'm here because I want to share my experience and through that enable new generations of Seekers\* to have even better processes."

The core team of Seekers\* no goes about transforming the results of the evaluation process into a plan for the coming years. They do this equipped with many new ideas and suggestions for improvement, but also with a strong affirmation in the basic principles of their work. As soon as possible, new groups will be able to enter into intensive dialogue processes.

## OVERCOMING ANGER AND MISTRUST - IMPRESSIONS FROM A CHALLENGING WOMEN'S SEMINAR

A key event that left its mark on all participants of this year's women's seminar, but especially on the Palestinian participants from the state of Israel, was the violent riots at the communal level in May of last year.

The fact that Gaza was then bombed by the Israeli military during the first week of the seminar this August also deeply affected all those present and once

again highlighted the seemingly hopeless situation on the ground.

The political climate was also reflected in the different motivations of the women to participate in the seminar. Luna\* (name changed) from East Jerusalem expressed it this way: "At least I can share my anger at this seminar. At home we can't share this anger because there

is no one to share it with, so we keep it under wraps. (...) The occupation turns us into angry people who have suppressed their anger for many years, but when this anger explodes, it explodes uncontrollably and affects all of us, including us Palestinians.

In everything we experience at home, we are constantly confronted with the occupation. Whether it is at university, at



Palestinian participants listening attentively during the presentation of the Israeli historical narrative by the Israeli group

work, at the hospitals or public authorities. You don't have to go to a demonstration to see the occupation. (...) We accumulate the anger inside us and we don't know what is the healthiest way to deal with it. (...) I think this seminar actually helped me to show some of my anger.”

Overall, this year's seminar was marked by challenges: For many of the Palestinian participants it was difficult to put trust into the dialogue process and in the Israeli participants. Many of the Israelis initially felt discouraged and frustrated in the face of the Palestinian's mistrust and were hesitant to share their personal stories and bring their perspectives to the table.

As a result, the dialogue process was slow to get off the ground. Outside the facilitated dialogue sessions there were also fewer joint activities than usual – for example, the joint closing evening was cancelled and the groups had separate farewell dinners.

Nevertheless, once more we were affirmed in our belief that it is worthwhile not to give up trust in the dialogue process and its momentum: In the closing circles, it became apparent that many participants had had a significant and also transformative experience despite the overall challenging course of the seminar.

It may be said that perhaps the dialogue process did not have the same intensity and was not as ‘fruitful’ as in previous years – but considering the current political situation this goal might have been unrealistic from the start.

In any case, for example Noa's\* (name changed) expectations of the seminar were fulfilled, as the Israeli from Haifa recounts:

“In my heart and my mind, I'm involved in all the struggles against social injustices. But whenever it comes to meeting those affected by injustice in person, hearing their story, getting to know them, having a face to a name, that's when I get emotional. (...)

I just start crying, and it doesn't make sense to go to a demonstration and then just cry. That's why I've always felt too vulnerable to participate in direct political actions. With the seminar I wanted to challenge myself. (...) And here I meet all these wonderful, great women, (...) they let their pain resonate [in their stories] and so you can't ignore their pain in any way. (...)

The seminar helps me to take courage and motivates me – not necessarily to act in a more radical way, but to think more radically about how to change things more deeply. I think that taking action has to be a mix: of your beliefs and direct, political activism.”

And even Luna\*, who didn't seem to be touched at all by the Israelis' stories until the end of the seminar, thanks an Israeli participant on the last day for trusting one-on-one conversations and tells the group that another Israeli's words during the closing session touched her emotionally in a way she had never experienced before.

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### Editorial

Brigitte Kläß, Katharina Ochsendorf,  
Tessa Pariyar

GRUNDRECHTE **KOMITEE.de**

Project Vacation From War

Aquinostraße 7-11 | 50670 Köln  
Phone +49 (0)221 97 26 918

info@ferien-vom-krieg.de

www.vacation-from-war.com

FerienvomKrieg.VacationfromWar  
 vacation\_from\_war