Youth negotiating conflict and life
A photo essay

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A room with a view?

Midways between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in Israel-Palestine, around the hilly Latrun area, one can find the only Jewish-Arab village within the state of Israel. The place is called Neve Shalom/Wahat al-salam or in English, ‘Oasis of Peace’. The name may confuse visitors. It is a biblical quote used to signal an intention to try peacefully, as one of the residents explained. People who live here know it is not an ‘oasis’. The village has the West Bank border running literally through its alleys, yet it is under Israeli jurisdiction. Spiritually it may be different. It was set up in the early 1970s by Bruno Hussar, a Dominican monk of Jewish extraction born in Egypt who aimed to establish a place where Jews and Arabs could live together. Today, around 50 families, about half Jewish and half Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship live there. You need Israeli citizenship, but as many Arabs in Israel do, you can also call yourself ‘Palestinian’. Hussar, the founder, a Mr. Hybrid par excellence, is buried in the village. This little fragile society is the only one of its kind in the Middle East, which also has a Jewish-Arab board, a bilingual school and an educational centre offering a range of conflict coping projects. On this small hilltop, where it is possible to see Ramallah

1 This essay is a rework of a PhD in cultural studies completed at Nottingham Trent University in late 2003. Some of the field material dealt with here is presented in more detail in the article ‘Dialogue With Conflict’ (same title as PhD), in Social Identities no. 3, 2006.
about ten miles away, anyone can enter the dumia, a room for meditation, prayer and contemplation (pictured above). The dumia may be a symbol of the village? An attempt to provide a different space to deal with the conflict by peaceful means and in another form of everyday contact and struggle. This may be a better vision of the village than this convenient exception and symbol of peace, an angle often taken by foreign media on the hunt for a sunny story. The village is no conflict free zone, but it has altered the means. The dumia has replaced the church, mosque and synagogue. The dumia is a calmer place for all religions and disagreements – also the secular ones! Recently the village was also the centre for a Roger Waters concert that attracted over 50,000 visitors. After writing ‘No Thought Control’ on the barrier between the state of Israel and the occupied territories, I wonder if gave himself time for the dumia? It was conceived with the idea that though people may be divided by differences in creed or culture, they find in dumia a common sanctuary. “For thou, silence (dumia) is praise”, Psalm 65,2.

Settling scores

Dealing with conflict may invite for its temporary forgetting through other kinds of activity. When one then returns to the conflict, that means their usual everyday lives, bodies and eyes may feel and see just a little bit differently. The boys of the Jewish-Arab village settling scores on the playground are here maybe practicing another ballgame than the one they grew up with? I did not ask them how the teams were made up. Football is most often about competition but it is also common intangible ‘gestaltung’, creating something together and playing by the same rules, mostly.
The village has a primary school that attracts not only children living in the village, but also pupils from towns and villages in the area. Near the school is the playground pictured above. They were both full of kids when I was there. This match is taking place in January 2000, and the ball has just gone outside the camera’s eye but the players’ bodies are still focusing on the ball. One boy raises his hands in excitement; two others are on the floor after a tackle. The ball went past the goal and the keeper is on his way to get it while most of the kids are shouting in Hebrew and Arabic. The result of the game is unknown.

Shelter from the storm

At the time when the photo of the barracks or shelter at the village Neve Shalom/Wahat al-salam was taken back in 2000, they were used for two to three day workshops in encounter projects for Jewish and Arab Israeli high school students. Today, in 2006, the projects continue in new buildings in the village. The students who come here, Jews and Arabs, may live together in the same country, but they do so separately.

Each national group has its own cluster of schools, secular and religious, and most cities and villages are segregated, although in Haifa, Jaffà, Ramla, Lod, Acre, Nazareth/Nazareth Illit and Jerusalem, for example, they live in close proximity and contact and crossing paths may occur more often than elsewhere. In general, the approximately 5 million Jews and 1 million Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship live in different worlds. Encounter projects, like these, give them a chance to meet. The projects are arranged by the village’s educational centre, School for Peace, a pioneering centre in Jewish-Palestinian conflict education in Israel-Palestine, including the territories, and with many international activities as well. Again the name may bewilder
newcomers, travellers, researchers. Looking in to the matter, one finds out that the conflict is on the agenda, although there are no bullet holes here (see later picture). The barracks or rooms on the photo above are – as the new rooms used today - intimate, suitable for smaller group activities and discussions where around sixteen people gather. There are no national symbols on the walls, and a mirror separates one of the rooms. Observers, as teachers or researchers for example, can follow the events though it without being able to interfere directly. A semi-intrusion is allowed, so to speak. Similar projects take place at other centres for alternative conflict education around the country. Another well established player in this field is Givat Haviva. They also run encounter projects for high school youth. The following images are from a few workshops back in October 2001, just after the outbreak of the 2nd intifada. In the text below I try to report and cast new light the experience. The program still run today, October 2006, now with around 3500 participants per year.

**Just girls and boys?**

Girls and boys from a Jewish and a Palestinian Arab Israel high school, both from the Galilee region are in exchange in a high school encounter project above. We are at Givat Haviva, one of the country’s oldest institutions for bridging initiatives in education, art and language. The photo here is from an autumn 2001 encounter, in the Face to Face project which also runs today.
There was no ‘window facility’ at Givat Haviva. The researcher and writer are allowed in, taking pictures and speaking to Jewish and Arab facilitators and students in breaks. Also a teacher is allowed in. She carries a silent, minor frown, but here at the beginning of the workshop the atmosphere is still amazingly positive: Jews and Arabs have been told to split in two circles, an inner and an outer circle. The topics for this activity are girl-boy relations and other cultural issues, such as family, community, leisure time and so forth. The two circles move in different directions and sometimes people change chairs so different people get to talk. I understand only little Arabic (can do some reading) and less Hebrew, although more Arabic than the Jewish facilitators. My linguistic handicap, communicated to the students, make the students less bothered about my presence. I can intrude without intruding. I can look more easily for other languages - and I speak to people and get translations in breaks. The activity pictured above allows for a display of personal and cultural issues not directly related to the conflict. The two parties see faces that are not just framed in the discourse, and the real experiences, of the conflict. They see human beings, not just the enemy, and they engage with the other in ways they are not habitually used to. Later, when other issues are brought up, the atmosphere changes. When the Arabs begin to assert their Palestinian-ness and a national identity conflicting with the Jewish state - not just being accommodating ‘Arab Israelis’ - and actually practice Arabic speech with demands of equal citizenship rights and symbols, the Jews are discomforted. There are two facilitators present in every group, a Jew and an Arab Israeli, and the introduction is done in both languages, however beginning in Arabic (reversing the outside reality, as they say), but tactics on the ground, like Jewish protests to Arabic, wrestle with the pedagogic framework. When the Hebrew language, which the Arabs also speak, does not underpin and dominate the encounter, the Jews see it as a dangerous voicing of the conflict and a threat to ‘Israel’.
The high school students in encounter projects at places like Givat Haviva and Neve Shalom/Wahat al salam usually work in mixed groups where Jews and Arabs work together as well as uni-national units where Arabs work alone with the Arab facilitator, before meeting all together, and visa versa. The group versus group approach, recognising/creating a Jewish versus an Arab entity within Israel, is common in encounters nowadays. Two groups, Jews and Arabs a part engage in a drawing exercise where they are asked to explore group identity through mapping and drawing. How do we imagine or vision home in a drawing? The principles are free, do we apply traditional cartography or do we take on other pairs of glasses? Above is pictured the map by a Jewish group lying on the floor in a circle all with a pencil in their hands. They have dotted their drawing with the typical red-roofed houses. See all the (red) dots
in between the flag and the Sea of Galilee. The students were all from the Galilee area in northern Israel, and the regional feel of the maps is evident. The red roofs are common in Jewish suburban areas in Israel and in the settlements in the territories.

Another home in the same country

The Palestinian Arab group have drawn another home in the same country. There are hills, trees, leaves and houses without red roofs. A different place, where other meanings and features have been ascribed/written into space. The country signifies different things depending on who we ask to represent it: the Jewish country, a Palestine that once were, a country with a ‘hidden’ Arabic population, a Diasporic space, a remaking of a dream, a loss of a dream, a cradle of several religions, a shelter, an escape route, an in-between ‘third space’, and so forth. In another photo game, not pictured here, they are asked to picture the Other. Bedouins, Orthodox Jews, Arabs in kifeya or hijab and a Tel-Avivian Jewish woman with very little clothes on appeared in those drawings. Such types are out there, but despite of the fact that many of the girls in the encounter wear hijab, the difference - at least to the foreign eye - are only subtle. It is not just a time of the intifada, but also a time of blue jeans, mobile phones and a globalized youth culture.
The third map

After creating two different maps comes the task of a negotiated imagination. With scissors and glue the two groups are asked to create a new map. One student initially grappled a blank piece of large paper, but was told to use the former two maps. We cannot erase the past, a facilitator explained to all. The meaning, drawings, already inscribed had to be used. So the map here may not really be third, but just combinatorial – yet it is something else! The Sea of Galilee, from the Jewish group’s drawing, is placed in the top-right quarter of the map, while the hills, with a tree on top, from the initial Arab map, are in the bottom left. The guy on the right yawns.
Morbid angels?

The educational encounter work is set up by adults with many good ideas of ‘scaffolding’ support to students, who under particular frameworks of facilitation are supposed to ‘build the house’ of conflict-exchange and identity exploration themselves. However, I wonder how youngsters would actually deal with, cope with or act out the conflict and their relationships in spaces they are more in control of or where they are more likely to determine the agenda. Football games and leisure time cakes and joints are among the few options here. Outside, in the ‘real world’ of Israel, there are fear, conflict and societal structures that make separation the norm. Institutions like Givat Haviva and School for Peace at Neve Shalom/Wahat al-salam, and many others in the country, legitimise and structure exchange at difficult times. Among the spontaneous
practices performed under/‘inside’ the umbrella of facilitator-surveillance (but not encouraged) is the drawing above. During a Jewish-Arab group discussion a boy let out a morbid angel before he later left the room when the heated debate was too much for him. Others stayed on, but readjusted their position in space and thereby also the philosophy of the encounter? Students usually place themselves in groups of Palestinians versus Jews, since this is the set-up, the ‘map’ drawn by the facilitators. This means they will sit in two half circles during bi-national sessions. This proved to be the case in all sessions I overviewed – although in one the Jews came in early spread around the full circle and thereby created a scattering of a smaller Palestinian group in to individuals here and there. A facilitator had the impression too that they were cunningly mirroring Israeli policies on the West Bank by shattering the unit. It could partly also be to break down the group v group set up. Just before this trick was performed, the Arab group had forcefully confronted the Jews, not just by arguments but also by shifting to Arabic.

The territory

Mapping and drawing is one thing, the territory out there is something else. In another world, not far away, the impact of contact looks like this in the West Bank town of Hebron. Here, at the market, just before dusk, the green doors full of bullet holes are closed. And the intifada continues. This was in October 2001. Photos from war zones, along with other photos depicting more peaceful scenes, are also often brought into
experience workshops, in a photo language activity. The students then have to pick photos they affiliate with or which trigger particular emotions. Often the Palestinians pick photos of war, while the Jews pick ones depicting peace.

Many identification cards, one identity

In the encounter workshop the ‘mapping’ exercises – whether with pencils or printed words - are about exploring identity, and to some extent also to challenge it. In this exercise each card has an identity or identification written on to it, in Hebrew and Arabic: Jew, Palestinian, Israeli, Zionist, Ashkenazi, Mizrachi, Muslim, Christian, Druze, religious, Arab, Human being, Girl, Boy. Pick the ones that are most important to you, the students were told by the two facilitators in the group. In one workshop the most popular cards were Human being, Girl and Boy. In another it was Zionist and Palestinian! In some workshops they have to pick a few and prioritise. Identity is explored and the many identifications – like colours on a palette – are revealed. In another time or space, some of the many aspects that make up identity may appear stronger or weaker, and new identifications may emerge? The teenagers are – especially in a time of conflict – strongly configured by their national identities, but they also arrive to and depart from many stations on the ‘identity’-line in those years. There are spaces and times for many ruptures near ahead. We could imagine, for example, that one could choose to be a Girl at Givat Haviva and a Muslim or Zionist outside, as primary identification. Further, many of the Jewish boys and girls here are ‘at school’ - for now. In a few years time they are in the Israeli army – all Jews have to serve. Palestinians are in their villages and towns, in a few years time they can vote in Israel,
they will realise – if it is not completely clear already - how hard the society is for ‘Arab Israelis’ and they will be encountering Jews in workspaces and the Israeli universities.

Grass-routes and birthdays

After the formal programme of the encounter workshop the students and teachers begin to inhabit, or modify, the educational space on their own terms. So what kind of semi-spontaneous gatherings happen then? Leisure time takes place *within* the educational, encounter space, so this is still not ‘my’ or ‘your’ territory, or neutral territory. Despite having many projects co-directed and signified by a Jew and an Arab, the institution grew out of the kibbutz-movement, it has a Jewish leadership and it takes place in Israel. The participants – not just occupied with politics or peace but also eager just to get a few days off school – have travelled from their respective villages, schools and communities, defined by separation, to meet the other. It is not just a space for alternative education, but also a space where the pillars of identity that carry them are questioned. It is a negotiating space, outside the places they know. But the time for discussion, arguments and collaborative activities between Jews and Arabs is up, apparently, for now – and a sense of home is invigorated. An Arab girl celebrates her birthday with a cake, some singing and chatting. Teachers and facilitators are joining in, but they are not arranging or organising things - fortunately. The encounter experience is not debated much. They are having fun, relaxing, and the ‘other group’, the Jews, is not having any cake. The facilitators confirm that separation during breaks and leisure-time is normal. Some research, however, points out that co-participation from both groups in dancing and ‘fighting over tapes’ is also common. But during this workshop
which lasted for two full days and one night they are mostly apart, when they are not set up together. This night, the Jews are doing something somewhere else. Next day I learn that some of the students have been sent home for smoking joints. I missed out on that opportunity for ‘participant observation’!

After the two days in encounter workshops the students, teachers and facilitators, Jewish and Palestinian Arab, return to their separate worlds. They have had striking new input and learned new things about themselves and ‘the other’. Not all impressions may be productive in such a short-term project, former facilitators of longer projects remark. They get a ‘shock’, rather than provide a processual educational framework. For some it is a productive shock. The world they are going back to is in some ways the same world they came from. But in some minor, however important, ways things have changed.

In a recent interview (October 2006) with an educational officer at Givat Haviva I was updated on newer developments. The facilitators continue to modify the program. For example, some of the older drawing games are at the moment replaced with more verbal activities. They have also for a while had a rope activity where participants locate themselves inside or outside a circle marked with a rope. The inside area is meant to symbolize ‘Israel – and so belonging is addressed in a metaphorical but also very concrete manner. The facilitators continue to experiment and draw from various devices and pedagogies used in different ways in many countries. The goals are, nevertheless, along the same lines, the educational officer explains. He says that this is to address issues of identity and conflict in Israel-Palestine, and yet in the encounter they try to create a ‘safe’, intimate and empathetic environment where this can be pursued. A focus on the broader and often conflictual issues must be combined with possibilities for individual contact and interaction on a more personal level, the Givat Haviva educator explains.

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