

## FROM BERLIN TO BAALBEK

In April Friends of Waldorf Education, in cooperation with UNESCO, carried out a programme of pedagogical emergency aid. In Baalbek in Lebanon the team consisting of seven voluntary workers – all Waldorf educators under the leadership of Friends co-worker Barbara Schiller – worked in five schools with traumatised children and provided the teachers with simple but highly effective artistic-pedagogical methods based on Waldorf education.

There is a forgotten link between Berlin and Baalbek (about two hours drive from Beirut), which our team discovered only in Baalbek. Many inhabitants told us that the German Kaiser Wilhelm II visited their city in 1898 and later provided major funding for the subsequent archaeological excavations there.

Baalbek („God of the Water Spring“) is in many ways extraordinary. Although it was only a small provincial centre, there are the ruins of the largest temple in the Roman Empire, dedicated to the God Jupiter. The six preserved columns are today a symbol for Lebanon. Only two years ago a 100 meter long ancient religious meeting room was excavated.

Most remarkable however, are the 13 meter high foundations of the temple precincts. Whilst the blocks of stone used in the Egyptian pyramids mostly weigh about between two and three tons, with some weighing as much as 70 tons, the foundations at Baalbek are built of twenty meter long exactly fitting blocks up to 1,000 tons in weight! Even with modern equipment they would be impossible to transport and yet they came from a quarry over one kilometer away over rough terrain that is today cut through with deep ravines.

These puzzling remains are much older than the Roman buildings and the whole area of Baalbek was settled at least as early as the third century before Christ and possibly much earlier. Arabic legend links the *Enclosure on the Lebanese Mountain* with the origins of humanity. In the seventh century Johannes Maro, the Patriarch of Lebanon reported that Cain built the enclosure and populated it with giants and that following the Biblical Flood Nimrod brought in giants to rebuild the city. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the home of the Gods is placed on a *mountain in the cedar forest*. All these indications point to the ancient past of Lebanon and particularly to Baalbek.

Today Baalbek is above all known as the hub of the drug trade and the main centre for Hisbollah. Because of this political background the city was the target for massive attacks in the summer of 2006. Children were naturally also victims of these attacks – and thus the reason for the deployment of our team.

### **Pedagogical Emergency help – our second deployment**

Following the successful deployment of Friends of Waldorf Education in the autumn of 2006 in Lebanon UNESCO requested a follow up visit in April to bring Emergency Pedagogy to schools in Baalbek. Under the leadership of Barbara Schiller – our co-worker in Berlin – a voluntary team of seven active Waldorf educators travelled once more to the Lebanon in order to work with traumatised children and with their teachers, offering therapeutic pedagogical activities. This second deployment took place within the framework of the UNESCO Emergency aid programme. The director of the UNESCO delegation for Arab countries, Dr. Osman had been so impressed with our work in the autumn that he invited us to return.

While the Lebanon has almost disappeared from our news media the situation there is still highly dangerous. Many expect the war to start again this summer and the internal political situation is highly explosive. One notices through the children how unnatural the atmosphere is. Even six year old children are talking about the next war and are fearful. They don't talk about what they want to play. They don't even play – a clear sign of a lost childhood! One even notices that the adults suffer under tension and fear. Uncertainty and fear for the future devour the life forces...

Conflicts did not even respect UNESCO. When Barbara Schiller visited the UNESCO Office to talk with Dr. Osman's project manager, Dr. Hegasi, she noticed the bullet holes in the walls and windows. She was informed that at the start of the year the entrance to the building was used during a fire fight. This was a normal day for UNESCO workers. The man sitting opposite her, Dr. Hegasi, could have been dead if he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time...

What could we do in this situation? We – that is beside Ms. Schiller seven Waldorf educators: The highly motivated curative eurythmists Sebastian von Tschammer and Myrta Faltin; the art therapists Erika Wickenhäuser and Gabriella Burkhardt, the drama teacher Claudia Bartholomeyczik and the Waldorf educator and craft teacher Klaus Lutz. Our team assistant was Georg Kreuer, who had already been in Baalbek as a *Friends* civil service worker.

UNESCO had organised three state schools for us with around 600 children and 60 teachers. Since there were several days of school holidays over the Easter period, we also worked with two private schools. The main focus of our approach was to work with the teachers in each school to develop artistic-pedagogical methods that can help harmonise and enliven the children and work to counter-balance the effects of war and political unrest. Thus we began our work.

### **„I have never seen them so happy“**

In one of the schools the daughter of the director taught English. She took Myrta and Sebastian into the 7th class. Her lessons were given with great engagement, but obviously she was suffering from stress. Both she and the children appear to be under the burden of a great weight – and we noticed this in other classes too. It is no wonder that after such a war and bearing in mind the total uncertainty of the situation- the schools can be closed again at any time.

Both eurythmists led the children into the exam room. The chairs were put to the side. Music from Mozart's Andante Grazioso was played and the children were called upon to move to this in a circle. After a few minutes the teacher remarked how relaxing it was just to watch. The children became ever more relaxed and happy, whilst beanbags were passed in the opposite direction. At the end the teacher was amazed: "I have never seen them so happy!"

"If it is so easy to led children to an experience of happiness, then one should take every opportunity to do so." said Myrta that afternoon.

Claudia and Sebastian had similar experiences in another school. The simple building had been built in 2005 beyond the main road on the edge of the fields with a wonderful view of the mountains. The playground is concrete and the windows have bars, even on the second floor. The school is generously built and well lit but is very rudimentary in its equipment. There are no rooms for the school administration, no common rooms and even the director's office seemed unfinished.

Our first meeting to get to know the teachers took place around the oil stove in the school manger's room. One English teacher described the children as unreceptive, un-concentrated and often coming

from difficult, poor and uneducated backgrounds. Usually there are only two or three pupils with whom one can work. How had the war affected them? The children can no longer sleep. They are alarmed by loud noises or the sound of aircraft. The war seemed to have ruined everything that the school had achieved with these children.

However it was our task to deal with *these* children in *this* place. Yet all that had been said beforehand was pushed into the background as soon as we started with clapping exercises, movement activities, improvisation exercises and action theatre. Apart from the shyness and silliness of some of the children in the drama exercises all the children were fully active. The English teacher was especially pleased how active and alert the children were even after the first lesson – she hardly recognised her pupils! Soon more teachers gathered to watch what we were doing and by the third day we were working with all the children in the school for up to six hours a day!

Beyond all the necessities of the school day and with the wonderful support of all the teachers, we given complete freedom to work and thus we were able to **bring much to the surface that had become buried** – radiant faces, attentive glances, joy, spontaneity, liveliness, openness, enthusiasm, endurance, courage and concentration.

Everywhere we were heartily welcomed. The people enjoyed the fact that we quite openly and joyously practiced artistically and that we were willing to exchange our pedagogical experience. Many teachers were open for new ideas. Everyone was aware that the children suffer from major concentration problems. They can only be held with strength. One is afraid to let go because one fears that it would be difficult to control that which would be released. Here one noticed how everyone is inwardly under tension, including the adults. They lack every form of relaxation, inner balance and peace.

With various pedagogical methods we were able to give the children the possibility to let go at last and to be able to find themselves again. Such methods included drama Pedagogy, improvisation, play, modelling, form drawing, water colour painting and Eurythmy. And because the pedagogical and therapeutic results were so obvious for the teachers, we agreed to work together on free days over Easter in workshops in which German and Lebanese teachers came together and exchanged experiences.

### **The narrow path of encounter...**

We were very impressed by the warmth and friendliness of the Lebanese people, even though this openness is by no means as obvious as it seemed. Baalbek is a highly sensitive area politically. The thought that people who come from outside might not always have good intentions can be experienced continuously. Creating an atmosphere of trust beyond cultural differences was the task of Barbara Schiller – in many hours of tea and coffee drinking. At the core of her work was the open hearted and honest discussions with many people – school directors, parents, children, our drivers, our local helpers, representatives of the Education Ministry and so on.

There is a path which can help people overcome all hindrances. The art is to find this path and to stay on it. One can then build on it. But if you leave the path, you can get lost – which in a land like the Lebanon is very easily done. There are any number of political, religious and other opinions – and so my personal opinion is not very useful to anyone. Yet the task here is to meet the other, irrespective of personal opinion. That is something which is very sensitive and can only be established through working together with other people. Everywhere we encountered highly educated people, who had experienced and suffered much. Nobody wanted empty phrases and talk. Everyone was searching for

something living. Barbara's whole work was to create space for us – space in which an atmosphere lived in which this German-Lebanese teacher exchange of experience could occur.

### **... and the question of what is essential**

It was also impressive to experience the engagement of the Lebanese teachers, who themselves can hardly bear to survive and who work in their schools with great energy- even though they often get paid months later. It is clear to see how much they love their pupils! And all that in winter coats because they cannot afford the heating costs. One school director – whose love for the pupils was visible in her face and who participated in all the workshops because she wanted to learn how she could work artistically with the pupils better, said, "I had quite forgotten that as a child I enjoyed painting – I hold a paint brush in my hands for the first time in nearly 40 years."

Children and adults had lost whole areas of experience or never learned them in the first place. It was shocking to see how unable children were to play. During the civil war and through the tensions of recent years so much has been lost. What experiences did we have? Big boys having fun skipping; the same experienced by a black veiled kindergarten teacher who hadn't done the same for 40 years; an eight year old boy who was enthusiastic to learn a new finger game; 14 year old girls yelling for joy over finger games. It was about the joy of childhood, the joy of something essential. And what interest do the children develop when they see a stranger show lively interest in them? That is pure future, pure forces of peace.

**Will our work have a lasting effect?** We discussed this question frequently within the group. We didn't just work with children this time. This time teacher Pedagogy was also a priority. We wanted to exchange with the teachers how one can work artistically with relatively simple means to make the teaching more rhythmical and balance the one-sidedness of head work. The rhythmical movement exercises help the children to physically and emotionally awaken, whilst at the same time find an inner peace – which is really the decisive basis for real learning. The joy that comes with this approach helps them to say yes to life and warm their hearts.

In all our work with the teachers it was crucial not to put them under the pressure of expectations they might not be able to fulfil. We could see how tired they were and what an existentially difficult situation they find themselves in. No one had to take on board anything they didn't want to or show interest in what we brought. If somebody left the room because he or she simply needed a half hour for themselves, to simply gaze out of the window, then we just went on working with the children.

That is obviously a great challenge for the contributors to such a programme. Due to the illness of one of the teachers Klaus was left alone several times with 32 Arabic speaking, class 7 pupils well into puberty! He explained later, how two girls offered to help translate and keep the class quiet. That was not just a normal 'cover lesson' such as he had often experienced in Germany! We were in Lebanon, in Baalbek. Who knows what these youngsters had experienced – no money to buy a coat, no windows in their home, perhaps no house any more, all one's relatives killed and the sound of detonations still in their ears? Nevertheless he reported:

„There was a moment of quiet as they all drew a breath. During the improvisation exercise three pupils were supposed to go onto the 'stage' and communicate through pantomime. All the others watched ... and listened, were still and then laughed. Even in form drawing they all took part fully. There was a working atmosphere. It crackled with concentration and mutual wonder at what they had achieved. The theatre exercises brought their relaxed cheerfulness back, combined with

attention and concentration for the individual and for the group. Form drawing allowed an almost lost, hidden life force to re-emerge, which felt good and was notable in their faces and movements. Then I realised – the effort had been worthwhile.”

Life in the Lebanon can be incredibly hard and joyless. All the joy and relaxation we experienced here with the children and the teachers had its value in itself. Kahlil Gibran the great Lebanese poet said, “the most beautiful thing in life is that our souls never stop to remain in the place where they were once happy...”

If one intends to change a whole system in a short time then one should not take part in such a project because it would only bring disappointment. When one can however experience the radiant faces of the children and the grateful eyes of the teachers that reaches into the future and gives hope, then one is in the right place with such a deployment.

The external circumstances of this deployment were quite rudimentary. On the mountains of Lebanon lay snow and it was extremely cold during those two weeks. For security reasons we all had to follow clear collective agreements and had hardly any individual free time, even in our accommodation. Our experiences ranged from military controls and tanks on the road to meeting rats in the (cold) showers. Some of us suffered from diarrhoea and a virulent virus infection. Nevertheless all the voluntary team members put their personal interests aside for the period of the project and focused totally on the work – yet were richly rewarded by the happy faces of the children.

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