

NEXT TIME I WOULD LIKE TO PERFORM THE PLAY MORE OFTEN...

Within the framework or the new programme we have become involve with, "Pedagogy in Emergencies," we have funded the travel costs of Waldorf teacher Susanne Merzenich, so that she could work with children and teachers in a school in Baalbek and in the Palestinian refugee camp, Shatila.

A morning in Shatila, a Palestinian Refugee Camp

The first day of winter had set in with pouring rains at 8 o'clock in the morning. Before this, the days had been hot – around 30°. Today there were perpetual traffic jams due to the rain, drivers loudly honking their horns.

The moment we started to drive along the streets of Shatila, a drastic change of scenery. The narrow dirt roads were filled with cars, scooters, push-prams, wheelchairs and a mass of pedestrians. Rubbish lay scattered around the over-full trash cans, and rubble from the bombed-out houses that stood in ruins round about. The people, in contrast, were cheerful, lively and natural, and very friendly.

We quickly found "Beit atfal Assumoud" (Social Centre for Children of the Resistance). As we entered, we found they were already awaiting us. The Director, Jamile, showed us into the 3 Kindergarten groups. We started with the oldest group of children.

I set up my puppet theatre: "About the boy who wanted to be taken everywhere." The teacher tells the children what I'm doing, and I introduce the puppets and the animals. Once everything is arranged on the table, it is covered with a thin cloth, and the story begins. The children, about 20 Palestinian refugees, sit on the floor round about. Full of wonder, following every gesture with their hands, they are completely immersed in what is happening. The silence is absolute!

I pause between sentences so that the teacher can translate my English into Arabic. The silence remains; the children are captivated by this too, until the end of the puppet show, after which the thin cloth once more covers over the events.

I pack it all into my suitcase once again, the children approach and help.

The same process is repeated in the other two groups.

After a short break I have $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour to work with the teachers themselves while the children play in the "yard" outside, the roof of a four-storey building.

The teachers have no real questions, so I begin to tell them something of the meaning of such simple little puppet shows, and about the effects the daily repetition of such activities have.

Then we begin to make little standing puppets. Joyfully the teachers take up the materials (uncarded wool and felt). Each of them sews a little puppet. Proudly and warmly, they show the directress what they have done.

They can now begin to work with these small puppets, which have been created in all simplicity, and should stimulate the children's own imagination. Are they going to manage it? Will they be able to access the powers of fantasy?

The children have shown me during the performance how warmly receptive they are, and what powers of concentration they are possessed of. I leave to go home knowing, “the next time I want to perform the play more often.”

A morning in the New Middle School in Baalbek, Lebanon

The landscape is captivating, the Bekaa Flats lying below us, with the Lebanese mountains following on. We reach Baalbek. New Middle School and met in the small office of the directress, Wafaa Mour-tada. Everything was organised and she led us, one after the other, to two different Kindergarten groups, in which the children were sitting at tables waiting for us. After greeting everyone, we set up a table for the little puppet show, the children sitting before it in two rows. The play began and the children were submerged in the simple narrative of my story. The same thing happened in the second group.

Thereafter we had one and a half hours to work with the 2 teachers and two other co-workers. They still had fond memories of the work done by the “Friends of Waldorf Education” in the spring. In the course of our conversation, we were able to touch on several important themes, from the essential element of movement in the first seven-year cycle, through the unfolding of the activity of the senses, the problems of video and television right up to the question of concentration through methods such as puppet theatre, which connects with the experience of rhythm in the child. The teachers received all of this with warmth and enthusiasm, seeming to know exactly what we were talking about.

Yet the questions remain with me: Why did these children seem so lost? Why are they not playing? Why do they only work at tables? Why does the Kindergarten look like a school classroom and the playground like the courtyard of a factory?

I went on to make little table puppets with them, and these they did beautifully. They asked for some materials and I left everything there – wool, felt, needles...

What is going to happen? Can I expect to see some small change on a subsequent visit?

We finally bade a very warm farewell to the directress. She would herself like very much to visit Germany in April 2008. And we in Mannheim would also like very much to accompany her for some days, showing her some of our activities.

Susanne Merzenich, 8.11.2007