



ALPINE PEACE CROSSING
Can there ever be Peace if Young Israelis and Palestinians
are not allowed to talk to each other?

by

Ernst Loeschner
Initiator and Chairman of APC

Krimml is a tiny village with barely 800 souls in the Austrian Alps, some 100 miles southwest of Salzburg, but it is well-known due to its thundering waterfalls, with glacier water gushing down some 1.000 feet in 3 cascades. But Krimml is also about to become known increasingly for another event, oblivious until a few years ago: the 1947 Jewish exodus over the Austrian Alps to Italy which started right at the edge of these waterfalls.

On June 25, 2007, a detailed article “Through the Alps, to Palestine” appeared in Haaretz, authored by Aryeh Dayan, featuring Yaffa Levy, Lili Segal and other contemporary witnesses of this Exodus. A few days later 10 of them joined me and over 150 others on the first commemorative crossing, step-by-step on the historical route, 60 years after some 5.000 Jewish men, women and children had left the camp *Givat Avoda* in Saalfelden, in groups of about 200 every other night during the summer of 1947, to start their 15 hour gruelling trek over the mountains in the hope to reach Eretz Israel eventually.

This commemoration was the starting point for the peace initiative *Alpine Peace Crossing* to honour the desperate, but determined Jewish refugees of this almost forgotten ordeal, and those who had helped them in their despair. At the same time, I had conceived APC from the beginning as a bridge of humanity from the past to the present, dedicated to all refugees worldwide. Nobody wanted the Jews in 1947, and nobody wants the refugees today, wherever they are, the only difference being that the refugees today are being told to “go home” whereas there was no home anymore for the Jews in 1947 as their “homes” had been

turned into graveyards. But even this difference is muted by the fate of the Palestinian refugees for whom “home” has also become an elusive notion.

A lot has happened since 2007 when the 1st APC took place:

- APC – with the commemorative crossing and the Krimml Peace Dialogue – has turned into an annual event, with altogether over 3.000 people in attendance during the past 6 years and up to 200 participating each year in the 8-hour crossing into Italy;
- Starting also in 2007 I have been invited to present our peace initiative at many venues, including the Bruno Kreisky Forum in Vienna and the Louvre in Paris;
- We were blessed to meet the two grand old men of the Bricha, Asher Ben Natan and Aba Gefen already in December 2007 in Israel;
- The former ambassador Dan Ashbel bestowed a posthumous official honour to Liesl Geisler, the legendary late innkeeper of the Krimmler Tauernhaus, the “mother of the refugees” of 1947;
- The Krimml Peace Dialogues have drawn attention to the plight of refugees in Africa, to human right violations regarding refugees from all over the world now living in Austria, and - as central themes in 2011 and 2012 - to the situation of the Palestinian and Tibetan refugees;
- In 2010 my deputy as chairman of APC, Hans Nerbl, organized the 1st student exchange between the HTL Saalfelden, a technical school, and a high school in Israel, with the joint participation of all students in the APC Commemorative Peace Crossing as a major highlight;
- APC has also initiated or commissioned documentary films, a commemorative medal and postage stamp, and numerous articles have appeared in the Austrian and international press. There has also been TV coverage from both Austria and Italy of our events; and
- Starting in 2011, APC has decided to be registered officially as a charity, rendering also financial support to refugees living in Austria, and has since welcomed people from many countries to support this initiative as member and/or donor. Last year we could, e.g. finance badly needed psycho-therapeutic sessions for 37 heavily traumatized refugees in Austria from all over the world, but there are still over 200 people on a 1(!) year waiting list for such treatments, so all donations to APC are both needed and appreciated.

Tomorrow, it will be already the 7th APC which is starting in Krimml. There will be an unusual number of highlights this time: the Austrian State President Heinz Fischer will be present via a video peace message. I will have the honour to interview the 100 (!) year old Marko Feingold, who had scouted the Jewish escape route over the Austrian Alps for the Bricha in 1947. Feingold continues

to be in excellent form, with – for a survivor of 4 concentration camps!! – a remarkable sense of humour. He still serves as the President of the Jewish Community in Salzburg, and for the expected 250+ people at the Krimml Peace Dialogue it will be very special to experience this outstanding human being in person.

Furthermore, all participants – especially those from Israel – will be witness to a very special happening, the inauguration of the “Nationalpark-APC-Peace Trail”: ever since it became clear that APC would turn into an annual event, I have carried with me the hope that we would eventually be able to dedicate a permanent installation in honour of the 1947 refugees. It had been my vision to rename the historic exodus route as “peace trail” and, together with Hans Nerbl and further APC friends, we have conceived the text for 7 installations along the route, to make people aware today - in the 3 languages German, English and Italian with symbols in Hebrew as well – what had really happened in 1947 both factually and emotionally.

APC applied of course for all sorts of permits to install these plates along the historic trail and, in doing so, started a dialogue with the “National Park Hohe Tauern Salzburg”. Its director Wolfgang Urban - realizing the uniqueness of this historic trail, running right through the “Core Zone” of the Park - proposed spontaneously a joint realisation of the “Nationalpark-APC-Peace Trail” and enabled also the funding for the installations. (The text of the 7 plates is already on the APC homepage www.alpinepeacecrossing.org.)

The 7th APC will thus commence with this inauguration which will take place in a special ceremony with all major religions participating, with Schlomo Hofmeister, the rabbi from Vienna; Catholic, Protestant and Hindu priests; and the Islamic and Buddhist Religious Communities of Austria. The present Israeli ambassador to Austria, Aviv Shir-On, will be special speaker as he was instrumental in bringing about APC’s first student exchange with Israel in 2010.

We believe it is important that this joint inter-religious peace message is in honour of refugees, of both those of the year 1947 and of those whose number is, alas, presently swelling daily by the thousands all over the world, especially in the Middle East due to the despicable current events in Syria.

Among those who will hear this peace message will also be some special guests from Israel:

- Uzi and Gal Talit, son and daughter of the already legendary 88- year old Moshe Talit who had come to the *Givat Avoda* camp in 1946 as a Zionist instructor and teacher - in 2007 he gave a brilliant account in Saalfelden

of his life and work at this camp when, as a starting point of the 1st APC, a commemorative stone was unveiled there;

- Jacov Shwartz who will come this time with his son and grandchildren: in 2007 he participated (with his sister Ahuva Shamir) in the first APC commemorative crossing, despite an artificial knee, as he was anxious to redo this crossing - in 1947, when he was 6 years old, his father had carried him on his shoulders over the Alps; and
- about 20 young students and their teachers from Israel, as described further in the next paragraphs.

In 2010 Hans Nerbl organized the first student exchange with Israel and it was my wish already then to include also some young Palestinians. But it was not easy to organise this first exchange, so we postponed the idea of a tri-partite exchange for a next occasion.

This spring and summer the principal architects of the 2nd student exchange with Israel are Wilfried Rohm from the HTL Saalfelden and Gadi Lahav (school principal) and Nir Yehudai from the Eynot Yarden School in Upper Galilee in Israel. The first part of this exchange has already taken place in early April when the Austrian youngsters came to Israel to meet their new friends. One of the highlights of this first get-together was, incidentally, a joint visit to an Arab-Israeli school, the “Al Battouf High School” in Arraba, Hazafon, half-way between Haifa and the Lake Genezareth, where it was impressive to note the cultural and political interest and the fine command of the English language of the young students at this school.

Rohm had actually corresponded early on with Lahav and Yehudai as to the possibility of including a Palestinian school as well in their planned exchange. I, too, had been impressed by earlier overtures which Lahav and Eynot Yarden staff members had undertaken in regard to a dialogue with young Arabs, and was then saddened to hear from them that any move towards an official exchange with a Palestinian school, with visibility in the public eye, would simply not be “wanted” at the political level.

They are still hoping to see a change which will make such encounters not only feasible but actually supported by the authorities. Eynot Yarden was involved, for several years, in the educational initiative and the activities of IPCR, the Israel Palestine Center for Research and Information in Jerusalem, and the school would in fact “go on with this important activity if it was still possible”.

Similarly, when I talked to Viola Raheb, a theologian and Palestinian peace activist now living in Vienna, I was told already in 2011 that – on an individual basis – it could well be arranged that some 10-15 young Palestinians would

come to Krimml, but that there was “no way” that a Palestinian school would be allowed to accept an official invitation to come to Austria for a tri-partite exchange with an Israeli school. This political stance is being compounded, according to various political science experts which I have consulted subsequently, by a possible stigmatization of all the young Palestinians coming to Austria for such an exchange: they might be regarded – probably even by a majority of their own people – as “traitors”, especially if it became known that they had participated in a peace trek which “honours the Jews”. The critics would argue that “no Israeli would ever participate in a peace march which honours the Palestinians”.

What is happening here on both sides??!! This question is not being posed to identify any culprits. Arthur Miller has said in his play “Incident at Vichy”: “I don’t want your guilt, I want your responsibility!” Thus, who IS responsible in both Israel and “Palestine” for the political framework - so called “policies and procedures” – which creates such a hostile climate? If even the young are not allowed to talk to each other, to communicate their hopes, fears and aspirations, there will never be peace in the Middle East.

At the Krimml Peace Dialogue we shall express both our sadness and disbelief that no Palestinian school can be invited officially to join us. But APC will continue to work with Austrian schools and with our Israeli friends until the time comes for a new beginning with a tri-partite exchange. I have expressed this hope in recent talks with David Grossman, Ari Rath and Daniel Barenboim in Vienna. All three have encouraged me to continue our quest.

EL 24.6.2013