



ALPINE PEACE CROSSING

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

by

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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 to the public until a few years ago: the 1947 Jewish exodus over the Austrian Alps to Italy which started right at the edge of these waterfalls. Some 5.000 Jewish men, women and children had come from the camp *Givat Avoda* in Saalfelden, in groups of about 200 every other night during the summer of 1947, to start their 15 hour grueling trek over the mountains in the hope to reach Eretz Israel eventually.

60 years later I founded *Alpine Peace Crossing* to honor the people of this almost forgotten ordeal and to dedicate our peace initiative to all refugees worldwide, as nobody wanted the Jews in 1947, and nobody wants the refugees today, wherever they are. In early July 2007, 10 of the 5.000 joined me and over 150 others on the first commemorative crossing, step-by-step on the historical route.

Tomorrow, already the 7th APC will happen in Krimml, with an unusual highlight: I will 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 shape, with a tremendous sense of humor, which is all the more remarkable since he survived 4 concentration camps . He still serves as the President of the Jewish Community in Salzburg.

Furthermore, the “National Park APC Peace Trail” will be inaugurated in honor of the 1947 refugees, with 7 installations along the route, to make people aware today - in German, English and Italian with symbols in Hebrew as well - of what really happened in 1947 both factually and emotionally. All major religions will be participating, with Schlomo Hofmeister, the rabbi from Vienna; a Catholic, a Protestant and a Hindu priest; and also the Islamic and Buddhist Communities of Austria.

In 2010 APC’s Hans Nerbl organized the first student exchange with Israel and it was my wish already then to include also some young Palestinians.

For the 2nd student exchange with Israel this year, the architects 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. With their young students they paid a joint visit to an Arab-Israeli school, the “Al Battouf High School” in Arraba, Hazafon, half-way between Haifa and the Lake Genezareth. They were impressed by the young Arab students’ openness and proficiency in English.

Rohm had enquired as to the possibility of including a Palestinian school as well in the 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 would simply not be “wanted” at the political level.

They are still hoping for change. 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, the theologian and Palestinian peace activist Viola Raheb now living in Vienna, told me 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 “honors the Jews”. The critics would argue that “no Israeli would ever participate in a peace march which honors the Palestinians”.

What is happening here on both sides??!!

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 create such a hostile climate? If the young are not even allowed to talk to each other, to communicate their hopes, fears and aspirations, how can there ever be peace in the Middle East?

APC will continue its work 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.

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