

Creating a future for Palestinian children

Interview with Wiebke Eden-Fleig by Cornelie Unger-Leistner¹

Waldorf initiatives in the Arab world are rare. The initiative started by the German political scientist Wiebke Eden-Fleig in Beirut is thus all the more remarkable. In autumn 2015, a kindergarten started in the Shatila Palestinian refugee camp which works on the basis of Waldorf education.

Ms. Eden-Fleig, why your commitment to this place in particular?

Eden-Fleig: After I had finished my politic science course at university, I worked for six years for a foundation in Beirut. In 2001 I went to Shatila for the first time with a photographer who was working on a research project on the twelve Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. I was so impressed that I decided to involve myself with Shatila.

What impressed you so much there?

Eden-Fleig: Shatila is a refugee camp which has become permanent. People have lived there for almost 70 years. The one kilometer square area was originally intended to house 3000 people; today there are 30,000. The Palestinians in Shatila have a curious interim status. They don't have any civil rights in Lebanon, many have no work and the children hardly any future.

I have friends in Beirut who grew up in Shatila and the situation there is not getting any better. The new streams of refugees coming from Syria mean that the camp is getting even fuller. The many new poor people make the poor people already there even poorer. There is more noise, more refuse and also more violence. That is very stressful for everyone, but particularly for the children.



¹ Chief editor of NNA. (News Network Anthroposophy). Originally appeared on the website: <http://www.nna-news.org> . © 2016 News Network Anthroposophy Limited (NNA).
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What gave you the idea of a Waldorf kindergarten?

Eden-Fleig: My own children go to a Waldorf nursery in Hamburg and the Waldorf school – that gave me the idea.

There are few kindergartens in the refugee camps and where they do exist, the children already sit there at the age of three cramming the alphabet in Arabic and English. After that they go to the UN schools which are very traditional regarding their teaching methods. They have a high percentage of dropouts because the children are frustrated and have lost the will to learn through such an early start. We also have to convince the parents in Shatila that it is the right thing to do to let the children “just” play. In other words, the work with the parents is also very important. We were able to fill them with enthusiasm: we already have a waiting list for the second year.

And when exactly did you start with this project?

Eden-Fleig: We started in October 2015 and deliberately began by keeping the project on a small scale with three groups of twelve children each. We didn't want to put too much pressure on our early-years teachers. Their training was financed, among others, by IASWECE, the International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education, and we are also supported by the Friends of Waldorf Education.

That has worked surprisingly well so far. We have six early-years teachers, a coordinator and managing director. Since September we have three groups with 20 children each. In principle it is a project which belongs to the team, that is the people on the ground.



What precisely is your role?

Eden-Fleig: I go there about once a month. I'm very lucky with the team. I support it above all with planning.

We are used to planning everything but it is not like that in Shatila. People don't look beyond the present because things are constantly changing anyway because of some political event or other. People are occupied above all with survival. Where is the next meal coming from, how can I buy shoes for the children – those are the question which occupy the people there. In this context a rhythm is particularly important for the children.

How do you finance the whole project?

Eden-Fleig: The project is secure for this year through UNICEF und the German NGO Kindernothilfe (Supporting Children in Need). I am busy writing applications and hope that this can be extended. The problem currently is that the large organisations have different priorities. They want to reach as many children as possible and that is not easy for a small project.



The civil war in Syria began five years ago and since then all the money has flowed into aid for Syria. We are not yet an approved Waldorf establishment but are working on the basis of Waldorf education and are supported by Waldorf organisations. I have now also set up an association in Hamburg to support the project; it is difficult for an international NGO to get itself registered in Lebanon.

How do you see the future of Shatila?

Eden-Fleig: My concern is with the children. They have grown up with wars, the trauma is passed on from one generation to the next. In 1982 Shatila was also the scene of a massacre in the Lebanese civil war – all those experiences remain raw. Here we hope that through our work with the elements

of Waldorf education we can at least alleviate the pressure a little bit – without straight away calling it therapy. The work with the parents is at least as important as the work with the children – the whole situation means that there is also a lot of violence within families.

There is little awareness any longer that the Palestinian refugees have been in Lebanon for such a long time and of the conditions under which they live there.

Eden-Fleig: That is also my experience, that people here don't know anything about it. The Palestinians in Lebanon have no civil rights, they are not allowed to work in about 20 professions. I have also learnt that visas cannot be "affixed" to their passports which means that they cannot travel anywhere because they cannot be issued a visa. In other words, their lives in Shatila are always dependent on support from the UN.

I have now worked there for 15 years and it is always apparent to me how the Palestinians are treated with disdain. The state schools will only take the Palestinian pupils if they have space. And the UN schools require prior attendance at a kindergarten. That is another reason why we started our project.

How could people help you?

Eden-Fleig: With donations of course!

Ms Eden-Fleig, we wish you all the best for your project, and above all that the dream of a Waldorf school for the Palestinian children will come true one day.

Donations for the Shatila kindergarten:

JUSTCHILDHOOD e.V., IBAN: DE22200505501252134224, BIC: HASPDEHHXXX

Donations for the further training of Early Childhood Educators:

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Learn more about the Shatila kindergarten at: <http://justchildhood.org/>