

# Begegnung

Stiftung Deutsch-Palästinensisches Jugendwerk  
الرابطه الفلسطينية الألمانية للتعاون الشبابي

“In times of conflict, encounters are of utmost importance. Usually wars are not decided on the battlefield but in talks and encounters. Thus the importance of this foundation cannot be overestimated [...] I very much appreciate the initiative of those, who started this cause.”

The former minister Hans Jürgen Wischnewski, who more than most politicians has been working for peace in the Middle East for decades, acknowledged Foundation Encounters as an institution of outstanding importance. Abdallah Frangi, the representative of the Palestinians in Germany, also spoke at the celebration in Gütersloh. Wischnewski and Frangi both emphatically pledged for the path of understanding and encounter adopted by the foundation. The Foundation Charter was presented by Regierungspräsident Andreas Wiebe in a touching ceremony on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2004. “This foundation is something special. The founders come from a wide background” the Regierungspräsident stressed. “I take my hat off to those, who have committed themselves in such an exemplary way.”

The idea of the foundation was first brought up by teachers of the Anne-Frank-School in Gütersloh, which has been organising an exchange programme with the School of Hope in Ramallah for several years. In 2002 an official partnership was signed. Apart from three teachers of the Anne-Frank-School, the founders of Foundation Encounters are the Lutheran Parish of Harsewinkel, Project Friendship Birzeit-Münster from Münster and individuals from Gütersloh, committed to the cause of peace in the Middle East: The Palestinian Bashar Shamout and Ingrid and Gerd Mohn. Foundation Encounters is a non partisan, non profit organisation. It intends to launch and support encounters of young people from Palestine and Germany or partnerships between schools and to financially safeguard them in the long term. We wish to initiate cooperations between cities and associations and create possibilities for practical training for young people and professionals and exchange programmes for teachers. Foundation Encounters wants to support projects that promote understanding between young people in Germany and Palestine and foster intercultural dialogue, tolerance and a peaceful and democratic way to deal with the other.

As Martin Liebschwager, the Harsewinkel Parish Priest and co-founder of Foundation Encounters stressed in his opening speech: “We are all consternated by the misery of the people in Palestine, of young people, who by the experience of war are led into a world, where violence is the only means of achieving ones goals. We are concerned about the growing speechlessness of the people in the region and the public opinion in our country. We’ve become used to the violence in Palestine and hardly become aware of it among soccer results and everyday news. We want to break this speechlessness and give a voice to those people, to let them know, that they are not forgotten and to help them get to know a different reality. Foundation Encounters is a small seed of hope, which hopefully will grow into a huge tree, under which many people may find peace, harmony and respect for their own personality”.

In an urgent appeal for negotiations and understanding, the former minister Hans-Jürgen Wischnewski criticised recent attempts of the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to set rules bypassing the Palestinians and neutralizing Arafat. “Peace can only be found in a mutual agreement, it cannot be dictated by one side. Both sides have to be part of it. On the other hand, he also criticised the suicide attacks, which he strongly disapproved of. “They do not help the cause of peace”. He considered them to be an expression of deep despair. “I want to stress quite clearly: These suicide attacks do not help to gain any sympathies. They damage the image of the Palestinians in the world.” The freeman of the City of Bethlehem considers it to be his task “to help the Palestinians to win respect in the eyes of the world.”

Hans-Jürgen Wischnewski pointed to the opportunities a foundation like Encounters may open in view of the set-backs of the Middle-East peace process. ”Just imagine what it means to those, who are enclosed over there, to get an opportunity to come here. I think, last year 15 young people came here, hosted by families, and got to know our life. And our young people got in insight into the difficult lot of the Palestinians.” Wischnewski suggested a meeting of Foundation Encounters with initiatives and members of the Parliament of the Land NRW, who are working for peace in the Middle East: For example representatives of the twin towns Cologne – Bethlehem, Project Friendship Birzeit-Münster and members of the German-Palestinian Group in the Länder Parliament. “We should get together as soon as possible to work out how we might increase our efforts, because this is urgently needed. [...]

Wischnewski appreciated Foundation Encounters, when he said: “This is of great value”, and he expressed his best wishes to the founding members: “I hope you will be successful and many young people over there and here can be reached. May our work serve peace and thus the people. There is no understanding without encounters.” Guest speaker Abdallah Frangi

agreed with his friend Wischniewski: "Peace in the Middle East cannot be based on a military solution." Frangi expressed his thanks to Germany for its various support in the building up of an infrastructure in the Occupied Territories and for bringing about encounters between Israelis and Palestinians. "Especially in times of conflict this new foundation is an important contribution of the people itself, to bring about peace in the Holy Land." He urged individuals and governments to get the courage "not to keep quiet if confronted with injustice. "I think this has been my lesson from German history: Not to keep quiet in the face of injustice. Not to support the Palestinians unilaterally, but to create a possibility for peace, a peace that is based on the principles of freedom, independence, autonomy and human rights, a peace, that guarantees the right of self-determination of both peoples and ensures that both may live in freedom and independence, without being afraid of each other."

Frangi called for a coherent and viable territory for the Palestinians: "Today we Palestinians are ready to found a Palestinian state on a quarter of Palestine, quite a small area. But this quarter has to be viable and must not be cut up or fenced in. Frangi pledged a vision of encounters between young Israelis and Palestinians in Germany. "I hope that the day will come, when here in Gütersloh or in Münster, we will invite Israelis and Palestinians together with Germans, and they will talk, debate and work out how peace can be reached. Once we will have come so far, this peace will materialize in the Holy Land, a peace between Palestinians and Israelis. (...) . We must not give up our hope, but have to continue our efforts to realize them. I am convinced: We will succeed."

The mayor of Gütersloh, Maria Unger, said: "In view of the depressing problems in the Middle East and in view of the many reasons for despair, an idea or a vision might kick off new developments. When the overall designs of governments or states are missing, or at least seem to be not effective, it is even more important to start working on concrete, clearly defined projects, to make small steps to improve the situation. Unusual initiatives are necessary in a situation that seems to be stuck. Young people have to be strengthened and rescued from the vicious circle of hate and violence. This is what you have set as an aim of your foundation." Fritz Krüger, Mayor of Münster, agreed that Foundation Encounters is founded by courageous individuals in a seemingly desperate situation. "Any effort for peace cannot be valued high enough." He expressed his hope that the foundation "may succeed to incite a lot of people to contribute, so that many encounters can be enhanced and thus the aim of the foundation can be fulfilled. Peace is our most precious good".

In her closing words Marita Kappler from Foundation Encounters showed herself delighted of the good response and the many good wishes of all speakers.

“A stay within German families enables young Palestinians to escape their inconceivable conditions of life and to gain new strength and hope for a better future”, Marita Kappler said. “We want to counteract the increasing propensity to violence and hopelessness. The experience of a different reality might release visions and ideas of a democratic, civil society, which the young people take back home. If you never experienced peace and democracy, you cannot dream of them, even less work to achieve them. Long term educational efforts and encounters are supposed to lay the foundations for a democratic and peaceful future. But these encounters are an important experience for young Germans too. Peace, freedom and democracy are no longer taken for granted. Confronted with the inconceivable conditions of life of their Palestinian peers, German students see their own worries and problems in a new perspective.”

Statements from students, who participated in the exchange programme of the Anne-Frank-School underline the importance of these encounters for both sides. “We were always deeply impressed by the readiness of all those involved, to challenge prejudices and fears and to reach out for each other.”

Students from Gütersloh said about the visit of their Palestinian guests in July 2003:

“I have met extraordinary people, who are living in a completely different, hardly imaginable reality. I have never met young people so full of life and gratitude, in spite of their depressing situation [...] The encounter with my Palestinian friends taught me, that there are always things we have in common, no matter from which social, cultural or geographic background we come. These things are sufficient to become close friends.”

“For me, this exchange has been extremely valuable, because I had to learn to get along with people from a different culture and with different values. At first this was difficult. But the better we got to know each other, the more we became friends. This is something that will last for all my life.”

Students from Ramallah said about their encounters in Gütersloh:

“I have won new friends, whom I will always remember. I will never forget this trip. The exchange with Germany is one of the best experiences a young Palestinian can make. During the two weeks in Gütersloh, we could get a real insight into German society. We feel privileged, to have been allowed to live in a completely different atmosphere, far away from war and tension. For Palestinian students it is of special importance to be able to live with gentle, understanding and considerate families for some time, with whom we spent a wonderful time. I will never forget this fantastic time.”

Marita Kappler urged the audience to idealistically and financially support Foundation Encounters. "We want to launch the stroke that at some time will fall the oak. It is not true that we cannot do anything but have to watch helplessly. Each and everyone can join in to open new horizons to young people and give alternatives to violence and hopelessness."

Beyond the initial share, Foundation Encounters needs considerable financial support to be able to launch and promote German-Palestinian projects. In the first year after the start of a foundation donations are especially deductible for taxation. Donations can be transferred to the following account:

Account Number: 58893, Sparkasse Gütersloh, Bank Code: 478 500 65.

IBAN:DE82 4785 0065 0000 0588 93, BIC: WELADED1GTL.

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