

The Wall Cannot Stop Our Stories

The Arabic concept of *sumud*, literally steadfastness, guides the youth' and women's work at the Arab Educational Institute in Bethlehem, member of the peace movement Pax Christi. At the time when the concept started to become widely used in the Palestinian movement in the occupied West Bank, at the end of the 1970s, its meaning was rather static. *Sumud* primarily meant the determination to stay on the land, not to leave, despite the Israeli occupation. Over the years the concept has come to increasingly stress the *inner* strength of people to cling to their home, not in despair but in dignity - with the feet standing fast and the head kept high. How to strengthen this inner power in the face of a never-ending occupation which leaves a diminishing living space for Palestinians who are surrounded by no-travel zones, settlements, checkpoints and borders? How to hope against hope?

This is the challenge which development and educational Palestinian organizations such as AEI face. In the context of the central West Bank, with its significant presence of Palestinian Christians among a majority of Moslem Palestinians, one strategy we applied has been strengthening the living together between the religions in Palestine. AEI now works together with the Ministry of Education of the Palestinian Authority at some 30 schools in the Bethlehem and Ramallah areas on a project called "Citizenship and diversity: Christian-Moslem living together." Moslem and Christian teenagers share religious lessons to learn about each other's religion; they visit each other's celebrations, take part in fieldtrips to both Moslem and Christian sites, and write stories about how Moslems and Christians in Palestine express solidarity and support each other in daily life or in emergencies. The students are encouraged to appreciate the land, its religious sites and communities, to have faith in the future, and to foster individual and community *sumud*.

AEI has two premises in Bethlehem: the Youth Media House in the center of town, and the Sumud Story House near the Bethlehem-Jerusalem checkpoint and the Wall around Rachel's Tomb. (Rachel's Tomb is a holy place in north Bethlehem annexed to Israel and walled in, thus made inaccessible for Palestinians). In the Youth Media House some 50 youth come together on weekly base to discuss issues of Palestinian youth life and share communication projects in the fields of arts, nonviolent communication, and physical activities. Important is that the activities go beyond the normal school pattern in the West Bank and Gaza that usually demands students to learn by rote. Instead, the youth - 6-30 years - are challenged to develop inner strength by thinking critically and acting creatively.

One recent activity in 2016 was a three-day educational workshop about the meaning of Palestinian Christian life in the Holy Land, and why it is important for the younger generation to keep the connection with the land and the community, to stay *sumud*. Is it possible to develop a positive spiritual life mission under occupation, with all the odds seemingly against you? Each of the youth wrote down a mission statement, and discussed it with others. At present, a youth group uses traditional Palestinian music

and lyrics to communicate present-day Palestinian life. A series of radio programs at the local news agency Maan gives AEI youth an opportunity to discuss public issues such as 'democracy' or 'smoking and drugs'.

At the Sumud Story House 5 women groups including a large choir as well as a family group regularly come together. Initially the Sumud Story House started in response to the building of the Wall in the Rachel's Tomb area in 2003-5. Several women members of AEI live there and asked themselves and AEI what to do about this terrible Wall which not only separates and robs Palestinians from their land but also creates an ongoing psychological experience of being under siege. Around 2007-8 AEI staff went in the neighborhood from door to door to invite women to join the groups at the House, and to develop mutual solidarity vis-a-vis the violence of the Wall.

Besides weekly meetings and workshops on non-violent communication and arts work, sometimes visited by EAPPI members, the women in the House are meeting foreign visiting groups interested to learn about daily life in Bethlehem, the besieged city of peace. In the context of an international project on women and human security – with partners in the Netherlands, Palestine and Iraq – the women of the House have linked up with women in the countryside and refugee camps in the Bethlehem area to jointly dialogue with local Palestinian authorities and police and challenge them to give higher priority to women's rights and security.

As a peace organization, AEI has been particularly active in developing symbolic protest activities next to the Wall. Inspired by the example of cultural protest movements against the Wall in cities like Berlin and Belfast, AEI has undertaken many public activities challenging the Wall, often together with international visitors and other Palestinian Christian organizations. Examples: a piano concert under a military watchtower, prayer and silence sessions, a living Christmas star of people carrying torches, a musical dialogue across walls from roofs and balconies (RAP music, trumpets, drums), an Arab coffee play expressing hospitality in an inhospitable environment, choir singing, and since 2009 an annual Sumud Festival.

Often EAPPI members have joined these activities as observers. In particular this applies to an initiative of AEI, started in 2011, to develop a 'Wall Museum' made up of large thin-metal posters on the Wall with human stories of Palestinian *sumud*. The stories, sponsored by donors abroad, narrate the strength to outwit soldiers, not to succumb to occupation, a life mission of raising a family, or keeping dignity in humiliating situations.

After thousands of visitors have read or photographed the stories, it very recently happened that the Israeli army came at 2:00 in the morning to document the Wall poster stories nearby the Sumud Story House. Over a period of two hours, a soldier read the stories in English, another translated them into Hebrew, and a third kept the recorder in his hand. Will the stories be registered as a form of 'incitement'?

Meanwhile, AEI has expanded the Wall Museum on the other, western side of Rachel's Tomb, near Aida refugee camp, with lively youth stories and photos as well as children fantasies.

In the long run, it is AEI's objective to develop focused educational activities in relation to the Wall. A recent initiative is the establishment of a Wall Information Center at the Sumud Story House, staffed by youth and women volunteers. As one visitor once said, "the Wall cannot stop your stories"!

A last development at AEI is an economical one. It is self-evident that sumud must have an economic base. In order to strengthen the financial position of youth and women, it is our intention to start up a one-year long vocational training to support home-based economies in the sphere of cultural tourism: home stays, cafeteria, Palestinian snacks on delivery base, workshops for tourists, and accompanying tourists ("rent a friend"). The long-term perspective is the development of a cooperative in the service of tourists who want to explore Palestine beyond the land marks and want to visit Palestinian homes - the base of community *sumud*.

For next year, 2017, the Arab Educational Institute (AEI) together with Palestine Link (PL) invite international artists to participate in an international exhibition near the wall in Betlehem. The subject will be *visions of occupation and/or freedom*. The exhibition will be part of an arts sumud festival in Bethlehem in the beginning of June 2017 when 50 years of occupation will be commemorated.